ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
REMNANTS of FILTH
6
YUWU

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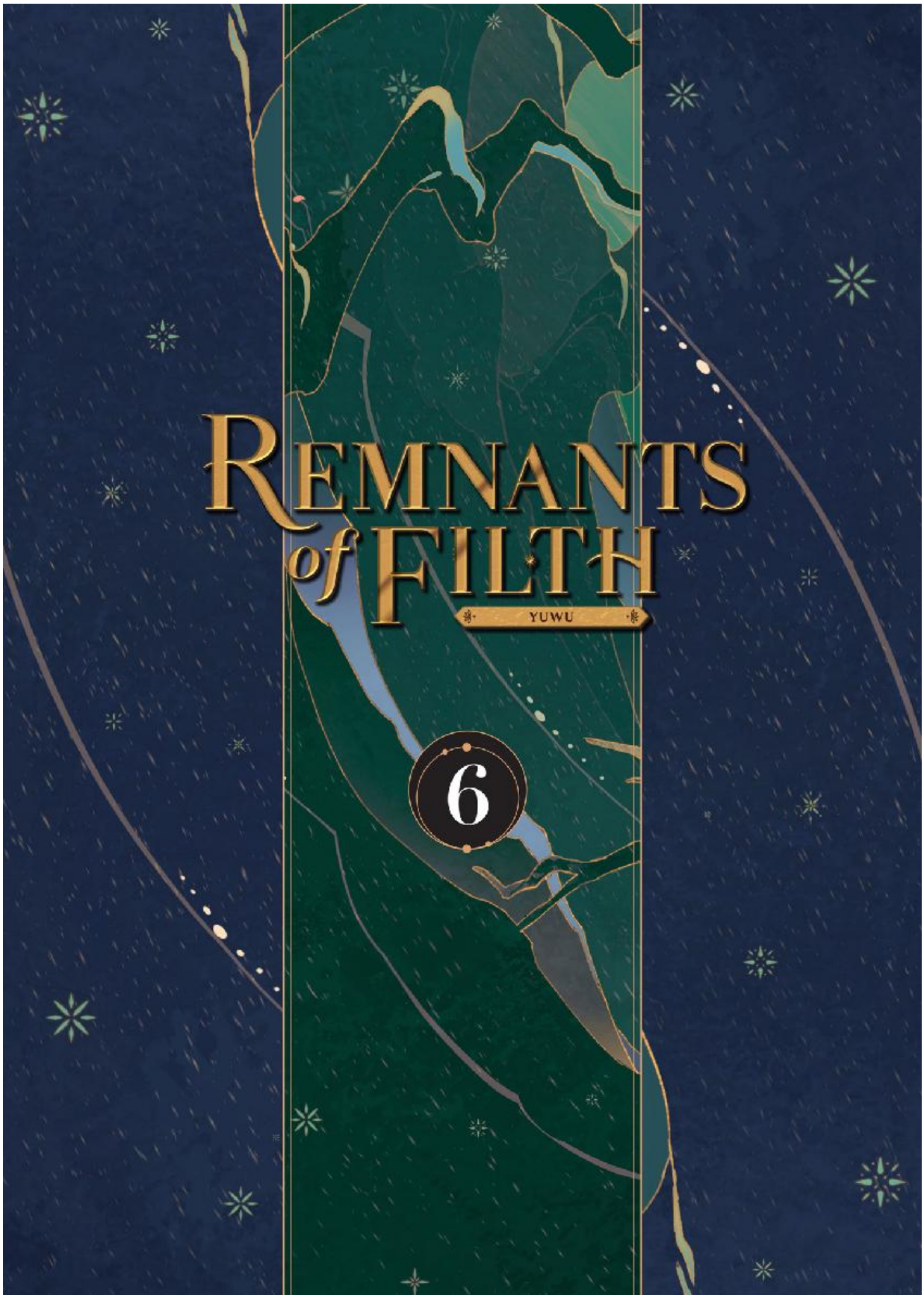
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Chapter 160:
The Legend of the Soul-Summoner

MO XI BROUGHT Gu Mang out of the treatment room.

A secret kept by one person would always be a secret. Between two, it would be an agreement. By the time a third became involved, it was a liability.

More than ten people had seen Mo Xi rescue Gu Mang. These were shadow guards who had undergone strict training within the palace, but they were just human in the end. No secret could be successfully kept by more than ten people. The matter of Xihe-jun risking his life to rescue a traitor rapidly spread throughout the entirety of Chonghua.

After the incident at Da'ze City, the streets were already rife with salacious rumors about Mo Xi and Gu Mang; when this news broke, many of those who had remained cautious or skeptical sank into suspicion, one after another.

"Has Xihe-jun gone insane? Why would he go so far for a traitor?"

"Ah, didn't you know? Their relationship's never been so simple."

"I know they used to be the very best of friends, but—"

"Brothers who'd follow each other into death? You should hear what Murong Lie is saying. He's a relative of the imperial family, he probably got the inside story. Your jaw's going to drop when you hear the truth!"

The entire city was abuzz, but Mo Xi had neither energy nor attention to spare for such trivialities. Although he'd reached Gu Mang in time to drag him back from the brink of becoming a demon, that mysterious assassin had managed to tell Gu Mang about the Vow of Calamity. Gu Mang, already hovering on the knife edge of insanity, had been dealt another great psychological blow—his mind was destroyed at last.

Just as Jiang Fuli had warned, Gu Mang's mind now was in worse condition than when the Liao Kingdom had returned him. Back then, Gu Mang had believed he was a wild wolf, but his thoughts had at least

remained human in nature. After these injuries, Gu Mang, upon waking, seemed to have lost all his humanity.

“When the Liao Kingdom tempered him, they wanted to turn him into a flesh-and-blood weapon. He didn’t need to think; he just needed to follow orders.” Mengze, having finished examining Gu Mang, stood beneath the colonnade that ran along the edge of Xihe Manor’s garden, speaking to a visibly exhausted Mo Xi.

“It was most likely the Liao Kingdom’s first attempt at such magic. They didn’t have a good grasp of it. At first, Gu Mang’s spiritual energy fluctuated, and his demonic qi became stronger, but there were no other obvious mutations. Later, he began to show signs of losing control, and became increasingly difficult for the Liao Kingdom to handle. In order to minimize their risk, the Liao Kingdom cut out the two souls containing his memories and sent him back to Chonghua.

“You can see there’s very little left of his mind. He hasn’t been devoured totally yet, but he’s more or less a mindless…”

Mengze paused, the word *monster* held between her scarlet lips. Mo Xi’s expression was beyond exhausted and agonized. She had grown up with Mo Xi; in all the years she had known him, she’d rarely seen such an expression on his face.

Beyond the corridor, a light drizzle was falling, and the pool’s red lotuses swayed with the wind. A golden carp swam beneath a wide lotus leaf, leaving glimmering ripples in its wake.

“But he remembers me,” Mo Xi whispered into the silence. He hesitated. “After I brought him out of the treatment room, he slept for almost two days. When he woke, he didn’t react to anyone else’s voice, but he remembered me.” Mo Xi lowered his gaze, as if, in speaking the words to Mengze, he was also consoling himself. “When I talk to him, he always responds.”

“He hasn’t yet been fully devoured by black magic. But in his current condition, virtually all of his memories have been destroyed.” Mengze sighed. “To be honest, I don’t really know how much longer he can hold out. Mo-dage, Medicine Master Jiang’s already told you this. After suffering a breakdown like that, the only way to recover would be finding those two lost souls.”

Mo Xi closed his eyes. Rain drummed on the tiles of the roof and streamed down the Taihu stones. Mo Xi's pitch-black brows were drawn low, and beneath his straight nose, his thin, pale lips were tightly compressed.

If it was just Mengze who said she couldn't save him, he might still have a wisp of hope. But Chonghua's foremost healer, Jiang Fuli, had long since warned him in the same words: *Unless you find his two souls, even an immortal from the highest of heavens couldn't save him.*

Mo Xi's fingernails sank deep into his palms. "How many healers in all of the Nine Provinces are capable of summoning souls?"

Mengze froze. "Mo-dage, surely you don't mean…"

Mo Xi turned toward her. "I want to summon those souls for him."

An expression of disbelief rippled across Mengze's face. "That's… That would be like fishing for a needle in the ocean," she murmured. "If the souls scattered, they could be anywhere. Even if you knew how to summon souls, the world is vast; it might take ten or twenty years to find them, and then only after untold difficulties. It would be an impossibly arduous undertaking."

"I know." Mo Xi stood with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing into the screen of rain that fell before the eaves like a beaded veil. "Of course it won't be easy to find those two souls." After a pause, he continued, voice steadier. "But it would be much harder to abandon him. In the past, everyone believed my family had fallen from grace, that I was doomed to fail," said Mo Xi. "No one would spare me a second glance. When I first enlisted, I did everything on my own. I stood guard alone, scouted alone, and ate my meals alone. Once, I was trapped by a pack of demon wolves and drenched in venomous blood—I thought no one would risk themselves to save me. I had no one I could rely on in all of Chonghua."

Mengze looked down, a little awkward. Mo Xi had been young back then, and they hadn't interacted much. She didn't know how to console him as he spoke of those past events, and only made a soft noise of agreement.

"He was the one who came to save me," Mo Xi told her. "With no consideration for whether he would be harmed, with no consideration for

whether he could dispel the demonic qi afterward, with no consideration for my identity or my circumstances. Now that it's my turn, Mengze, it's the same. No matter how hard it will be, no matter how it will end, no matter how long it takes," Mo Xi said, "I will not turn back. As long as he's still alive, as long as I'm still alive. Not until one of us departs this world."

Jade-green bamboo swayed against the white walls of the courtyard, rustling wetly in the wind and rain. "Or he returns to health," Mo Xi finished.

Mengze looked at the man before her. She'd heard plenty of the murmurs spreading within the city over the past few days. As one of Mo Xi's closest confidantes, she knew the truth better than most. She knew very well what Gu Mang meant to Mo Xi, and because of this knowledge, she felt Mo Xi was far too strong. Clearly, what he held in his arms was a flame about to gutter out. Clearly, what lay before him was a pitch-black road. Clearly, every fresh piece of news he received was more devastating than the last. Yet Mo Xi endured all of it.

In her capacity as a healer, Mengze had seen all types of people become fearful, despairing, reluctant, or mad when faced with such a plight. She'd seen children turn away from their ailing parents in sorrow, husbands give up on their weakening wives in cowardice… Many of those people, when forced into a corner, could only bow their heads in defeat. She wasn't in their shoes; she hadn't experienced their lives and suffering, and so she hesitated to rashly judge their choices as right or wrong, selfish or merely indifferent. Still, she had seen her share of the fickleness of devotion.

How could she not be moved at the sight of Mo Xi's stubbornness in refusing to bow to fate? Mo Xi didn't complain or blame others for his situation, nor did he lash out or break down. Anyone could see the unbearable weight of the emotions he suppressed in his face. Anyone could see how, even now, his fingertips trembled as he stood beside her. But this man was extraordinarily clear about everything he did, and was terribly harsh on himself. He never wasted time doing anything he considered unnecessary, even if venting his sorrow would bring him some momentary ease. Throughout all this, he had been calm in a way that was almost masochistic, battling nightmares that were more than enough to destroy his heart countless times over.

In the end, Mengze heaved a sigh. “The Soul-Summoning technique…is a piece of the Rebirth technique, one of the three great forbidden arts. For a healer to practice this school of magic, they would need not only a sufficient level of cultivation but also to have had the opportunity to learn the technique. In the rumors among the medicine sects, such individuals are nearly supernatural in their abilities, and their whereabouts are unknown—they’re practically legendary. But…”

Mengze paused, her slender fingers gripping the hems of her sleeves as if in indecision. Looking up, she continued, “I once came across a legend in a medicine manual I found in a bookshop. North of Lin’an, there’s a cluster of densely wooded mountains. Within them lives a reclusive sage who knows Rebirth.”

She saw Mo Xi’s pitch-black eyes light up.

“The Soul-Summoning technique is the first step of Rebirth. If the legend is true, this sage could certainly summon Gu-shixiong’s two lost souls, but…” She turned away. “This legend is no more than a few sentences,” she explained quietly. “There’s no other evidence of such a sage living near Lin’an. Assuming it’s true, this person has vanished into the mountains and would be nigh impossible to find. In the legend, his temperament is fickle and capricious; he helps people when happy and harms them when displeased. Even if you two manage to find him, you can’t know if it’ll bring fortune or calamity.”

She could see by Mo Xi’s expression that he’d already made up his mind. Mengze sighed. “Mo-dage, if you really want to go, I can’t stop you. Chonghua is at war with the Liao Kingdom, and Lian-ge is bedridden with his injuries. At this moment, his life hangs by a thread; even I don’t know if it’s possible to save him. If you really can help Gu-shixiong recover, it would be a great boon to Chonghua. But the situation is delicate… I worry Imperial Brother won’t let you travel far from the capital. How about this? Go in and take some rest. After all, you sustained considerable injury suppressing Gu-shixiong’s demonic qi. In the meantime, allow me to explain to Imperial Brother and make the request on your behalf.”

She gave Mo Xi a gentle smile that couldn’t hide the faint sorrow in her eyes. “I’m sorry—I wasn’t the first person to recognize your potential. When your family was struggling, I wasn’t at your side… Let me help you

one more time. If you can save the person that you…that you care for…” She looked down, wisps of dark hair curling at her pale, slender neck. “Then I would be happy too. Rest assured: leave Imperial Brother to me.”

The rain had grown heavier. Mengze gave Mo Xi some final instructions on Gu Mang’s medicine, then summoned Yue-niang. The two women left under umbrellas.

Mo Xi returned to the room to sit beside Gu Mang.

Only a few servants remained in the courtyard, Housekeeper Li among them.

“Shifu, why are you frowning? What are you thinking?” a new apprentice asked, rousing Li Wei from his thoughts.

Li Wei looked away from the decorative screen he’d been gazing at and cleared his throat. “Nothing.”

Of course it wasn’t nothing. He’d heard Princess Mengze’s entire conversation with his lord. All throughout, he’d felt uneasy.

Li Wei had previously served in the palace. He’d seen enough of concubines, consorts, and female officials. However noble these women’s birth, they were still human; they had human emotions, and emotions were rarely easily dispelled. It was feeling that made them sit alone in an empty bed-canopy until daybreak, or laugh unabashedly in their own palace hall upon hearing some other favored concubine had died of disease. Feeling drove their schemes, hatred, and jealousy; it was why there were many things they clung to against all reason.

But to Li Wei, Mengze seemed unlike those other women. While she did experience hardship, sorrow, and dissatisfaction, it all appeared fake to Li Wei, like powder on a beauty’s face. Love that could be so easily abandoned was not love at all—and she’d waited for Mo Xi in vain more than ten years. Or was it perhaps that, as one of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, her behavior simply wasn’t like that of ordinary women?

As Li Wei thought, he couldn’t help but furrow his brow.

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Chapter 161:
Lies

THE STORM WORSENED in the wake of Mengze leaving. Muffled thunder rumbled overhead, pressing down on the capital of Chonghua.

Gu Mang was asleep, but Mo Xi knew he was afraid of thunder. He didn't move from the room. Evening found him at the west-facing window, trimming the candle wick with a pair of golden shears. The hazy flame flared, setting the whole room flickering with light.

He returned to Gu Mang's side and sat on the edge of the bed. Gu Mang's pillow had shifted sideways as he slept, so Mo Xi helped him straighten it back out.

It was at this point that he discovered the book beneath the pillow.

Mo Xi froze for a moment before pulling out the book. There was no title inscribed on its cover, but upon flipping it open to the first page and seeing that familiar hand, he immediately understood—this was the booklet of notes Gu Mang had written in every day to retain his memories.

He had wanted to read it when he'd first discovered it, but Gu Mang had stopped him. It would be far too embarrassing, he'd said; Mo Xi was only to read it after he lost his memories again. Moments later, realizing he had put a damper on Mo Xi's mood, Gu Mang had cajoled him—*Aiya, who knew how much he might still remember ten or twenty years in the future?*—and told Mo Xi not to worry so much.

Mo Xi hadn't expected those "ten or twenty years" to pass so quickly. He spread the book over his lap, lowering his gaze to read every word written on its pages.

Gu Mang had recorded many things in this compendium of memories. He'd written of his life in the academy, and after, when he'd enlisted. He wrote of Murong Lian, the emperor, and of course, of Mo Xi himself. But Mo Xi quickly realized that no matter who was mentioned, Gu Mang only wrote good things about them, even if they had treated him poorly in the past.

In all that thick stack of pages, there wasn’t a single word of complaint. Gu Mang had experienced untold humiliation at the academy, yet he wrote only that, *The pastries at the northern side of the academy are golden and crispy, delicious and cheap—how nice*. He’d risked death the first time he served in battle, but he only said, *I made quite a few good friends, and not a single one lost his life—what luck*. He wrote of Lu Zhanxing, saying he was *valiant and heroic*. He wrote of the emperor, saying he had *many far-reaching worries*.

Even when writing of Murong Lian, the strokes of his brush were graceful, inscribing the mild words: *Someone dear to me once said he gave me grace—I mustn’t be careless with him.*

Everything he wrote was good. The misery that pervaded his life, the malice that had dogged him like a shadow, the suffering of his unanswered yearning—all of it had been excised. He’d endured endless torment for his overly ambitious dream, yet he only wanted to remember the small measure of sweetness he’d experienced. Anything of the ugly, the dark, and the crazed, was no more than dust from a tumble, easily brushed off and too unimportant to mention.

Reading this book, it seemed Gu Mang had lived a pleasant and contented life. He’d experienced nothing but kindness.

Wax pooled silently in the lamp. This book of memories was surpassingly gentle, but it made Mo Xi choke with emotion; it was a long time before he recovered enough to keep reading.

Just as he flipped to the page about their first meeting at the academy, eyes swimming with tears, he heard a soft movement at his side, like the rustle of a cub stirring. He swiped at his eyes before turning, only to find that Gu Mang had woken some time ago, and was silently gazing at him with those lake-blue eyes.

“You—you’re unhappy.”

Mo Xi stared back at him.

“Why are you crying?”

Their conversation seemed to echo their first reunion at Luomei Pavilion. His Gu-shixiong’s wit, cleverness, and brash attitude had come

and gone, leaving nothing behind. But this time, Mo Xi would never disdain him, scorn him, or bully him.

Mo Xi reached out, mussing Gu Mang's hair as he bent his mouth in a faint smile. "I'm not unhappy. I'm reading the things you wrote, and I like them very much."

"Things I wrote…" In his astonishment, Gu Mang dragged the book off of Mo Xi's knees and into his own lap to flip through. He lowered his head to look at the pages, looked up at Mo Xi, then lowered his head and looked some more.

His mind had been ripped to shreds by the black magic curse. Only his trust in Mo Xi stubbornly remained. Gu Mang closed the book. "Can't remember. But if you like it, I must've done well. You're always right." After a pause, he piped up, curious. "What did I write about?"

"You wrote about…many things that you've forgotten. The past thirty years of your life."

"Oh." Gu Mang puffed out his cheeks in thought. He cocked his head and racked his brain, but he couldn't remember anything. That didn't seem to bother him. He asked placidly, "How was my life, then?"

Mo Xi was silent for a long time. His throat seemed to be filled with the saltiness of seawater, bitter wetness soaking every breath. In the face of Gu Mang's calm, inquisitive gaze, he hesitated. "You only ever met kind people and had happy experiences," he finally said with a smile. "It was a very good life."

Gu Mang's clear blue eyes widened, his long lashes fluttering. "Really?" Before Mo Xi could squeeze any words out through his pain, a smile bloomed on Gu Mang's face. "Then I'm lucky." He patted his own head. "It's a little sad though; so many good things, but I can't remember any of them. I only remember you. You've always been good to me."

Mo Xi's heartache turned into sharp knives that sawed into his bones. He almost didn't dare look into Gu Mang's limpid eyes. "Not always," he said helplessly.

I've also… I've also done things that hurt you.

I've also distanced myself from you.

Gu Mang cocked his head in thought before amending his words: “You’ve always been the best.” Despite Mo Xi’s silence, Gu Mang stretched a hand out. He clumsily patted Mo Xi’s hair, mimicking how Mo Xi comforted him.

Mo Xi realized with sudden clarity that not remembering might be in fact freeing for Gu Mang. He wouldn’t have to mourn Lu Zhanxing’s death, wouldn’t be burdened by the death of his seventy thousand comrades, wouldn’t look down and see the blood of innocent people in the lines of his palm every day and every night—not anymore. He could just look at his book of memories; he could keep only the good things from his past.

But Mo Xi couldn’t do the same. The black magic demonic qi within Gu Mang was still on the verge of spiraling out of control. Only by finding those two lost souls and making Gu Mang whole could he keep his beloved from falling into hell.

“Shixiong…”

“Hm?”

“No matter what happens.” Mo Xi took hold of his hands and spoke with utmost earnestness. “I will always stay with you.”

Gu Mang nodded serenely. “That’s really good. I’ll always stay with you, too.”

Rain sheeted down outside the window, and thunder rumbled again. But this time, Gu Mang wasn’t afraid; he turned that blue gaze toward the lead-gray sky, looking at it with a confused curiosity. It was instead Fandou, asleep on the ground, who was woken by the noise. Whimpering softly, he scurried over to the bed to hunker down between his two masters.

Night fell, and rain drummed down. But rain would always cease, and dawn would always come. Just like in that book of memories placed between them. In recollection, only the brightest moments were remembered.

As expected, the emperor was not inclined to let Mo Xi take Gu Mang to Lin’an. “The chances of finding some grandmaster cultivator out in the wilds are minuscule. Why not wait for Jiang Fuli to return from his

travels and have him take a look? We've retrieved the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul. Zhou He is studying it now; he may develop a technique to inhibit black magic energy quite soon. If you stay in the capital, you can keep an eye on his progress at least. If he succeeds, he can immediately use it to help Gu Mang."

But Mo Xi was determined to try. With the aid of Mengze's persuasion, the emperor relented.

Nevertheless, before the day of Mo Xi's departure, the emperor called him once more to Zhuque Hall. "Xihe-jun, the border between Liao and Chonghua is fraught; we fear another major battle may break out at any time. You have always been a clear-headed man; you know Subject Gu's intent and understand his character. He'd never wish you to delay matters of war because of him. Although we have agreed to grant you a month of leave so you may search Lin'an for this Soul-Summoning technique, we expect you'll return on time regardless of the outcome."

"Yes," Mo Xi said in acquiescence.

The emperor nodded. After thinking a moment, he added a few more words of warning: "Wangshu-jun's life is still in jeopardy, and Yue Juntian's health is poor in his old age. The state of Chonghua's internal affairs leaves us uneasy. There have been assassins in the palace—and the identities of those who attacked Wangshu-jun are still unknown. We worry whoever is working behind the scenes may target you as well. You must be careful on this journey. When you reach the prefecture of Lin'an, visit Yue Juntian if you have the time. Urge him to work faster and refine the tool Zhou He wants. And tell the Yue Clan to be careful as well—something tells us we haven't seen the last of those assassins' attacks."

Mo Xi agreed to it all. As he finally made to leave, the emperor called out to him yet again. "Wait a minute. We have one more thing to say."

He turned his head. This time, the emperor wore a hesitant expression and didn't immediately voice his thoughts. He pondered for several moments before saying, "Over the past few days, there've been all manner of rumors concerning your relationship with Subject Gu…"

Mo Xi waited for him to elaborate.

“We won’t ask too much now. But gossip and public opinion cannot be taken lightly. Regardless of what relationship the two of you share in truth, those who wish you harm will say unspeakable things. What matters actually pass between the two of you are far less important than the guesses they’ll make as to your motives. There are even some who say you’re the same as Gu Mang—that both of you plot to re-enact history and crown yourselves king like Hua Po’an; that your intentions are treacherous and impure.”

Mo Xi only smiled at him. “Does Your Imperial Majesty believe it?”

“What do you think?” The emperor rolled his eyes. “No matter how paranoid we are, would we suspect someone who’s sworn the Vow of Calamity? We’re merely making the point that carrying on like this will erode your authority. It would be best to distance yourself from Subject Gu.” Pausing, he gazed probingly at Mo Xi. “Ah, but you two aren’t *actually*…?”

“Did Your Imperial Majesty not say you wouldn’t ask?”

“…We were just thinking aloud.”

“More than ten years ago, when my family fell from grace, it was Gu-shixiong who took care of me and stuck by me when I was at my lowest. His best friend Lu Zhanxing told him not to get close to a fallen noble, in case I encountered even more misfortune and dragged him down with me. Does Your Imperial Majesty know how he replied?”

The emperor was silent.

“His answer in the past is my answer today.” Mo Xi drew in a breath, his exquisite features gilded by the sunlight passing through the open windows. He said, calm and resolute, “Nothing has more value than sincere feeling.”

What was left unspoken was obvious. Regardless of whether the connection was between brothers, comrades, or lovers…if there was sincerity in it, there would be no regrets, no matter what others said or what troubles came. He would not let go of Gu Mang, nor would he step aside for fear that remaining at Gu Mang’s side meant he’d be stained. Back when Mo Xi had sunk deep into the mud, it was this man who had reached out a pristine hand and rescued him from the cold and the filth.

Gu Mang was not his stain, but the light in his heart that had never gone out.

At this point, there was nothing left to ask that wouldn’t make things uncomfortable. The emperor sat down wearily in his rosewood chair, leaning back against the Kui dragons chasing each other along its rounded back, and waved a hand at Mo Xi. “Good grief; what else can we say? We can’t insist without sounding downright unreasonable. All right, enough. Get the hell out.” He huffed. “You stress us out—the both of you.”

Mo Xi pursed his thin lips, made his obeisance, and left Zhuque Hall. He headed for his manor to pack for his and Gu Mang’s journey to Lin’an.

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Chapter 162:
Fiefdom of Lin’an

LIN’AN WAS A SHORT journey from the capital of Chonghua, less than a day’s travel by water on a spiritual boat. Their travels were smooth and peaceful, aside from the clamoring of monkeys echoing from the mountains on both sides. As they passed villages and towns, the vast structures of the capital with their sweeping eaves and sturdy brackets gradually yielded to humbler dwellings with whitewashed walls and umber-black roof tiles, clustered close to the water.

The boatmaiden steering their vessel was a Lin’an girl of seventeen or eighteen who had spent much of her life on this canal. Mo Xi and Gu Mang were dressed like commoners for the journey, and this boatmaiden’s chief cares were things like the price per catty of fish and shrimp or the next day’s forecast on the water; she had no interest in political affairs whatsoever, and didn’t recognize either of them. On the journey, she giggled and chatted with them in a sweet Wu dialect, speaking of sundry things—the customs of Lichun in one breath and the harsh winters of Yanbei City in the next; about how the beef noodle soup from Fan City tasted best with chili flakes, or how crisp the pastries were at a certain stall on the northern frontier.

Gu Mang listened mindlessly as he munched on the little dried fish the boatmaiden had given him. “You’ve been to so many places,” he cut in.

“Me? But I haven’t been to those places at all.” The boatmaiden’s laughter was more brilliant than the glimmering waves stirred by her thin bamboo pole. “When I reach a port, I tell people to bring over stuff that’s good to use and eat; I don’t get off the boat more than a few times a year.” She giggled. “My toes never touch the soil; I’m a fairy of the water.”

Such a statement would have sounded ridiculously affected if said by someone else. But the girl was ethereally beautiful, cheeks dimpling deeply when she smiled. Her eyes were more expressive still, so dark they shone purple. She stood at the prow, slender hands moving the bamboo pole through the water. With her fluttering sleeves and hair dark as ink, she

looked like a river goddess risen from the waters. It was too bad she was a little chatterbox. Mo Xi soon grew tired of listening to her prattle on in her lilting tones, but when he turned to glance at Gu Mang, he found him rapt, his blue eyes wide as he stared. When he was most engrossed in her tales, he momentarily forgot to chew on the dried fish dangling from his mouth.

“My shifu brought me onto the boat when I was little, and I’ve lived on it since. After my shifu passed, it’s been just me. Don’t underestimate me because my boat’s small—I’ve weathered every sort of storm and carried every sort of person.”

Seeing Gu Mang’s interest, Mo Xi humored the boatmaiden and asked, “Who else have you carried?”

“Quite a few major cultivators,” the boatmaiden answered with undisguised glee. “Their titles were too long; I can’t remember them. But let me tell you, when my shifu was still around, even Yue Juntian, the feudal lord of Lin’an, took a ride on our boat.”

Briefly speechless, Mo Xi grimaced. “Yue Juntian is a grandmaster artificer. Why would he need to travel on someone else’s boat?”

The boatmaiden widened her eyes. “But it’s the truth! And why wouldn’t he? He loved to go out in disguise when he was younger. He really did take our boat, really! I was little then and didn’t recognize him. Later my shifu told me the lecherous one was Yue Juntian himself. He’d come to Lin’an City to mess around whenever the urge took him. My shifu said it was lucky I was so little. If I’d been any older, I would’ve needed to rub mud on my face—otherwise, with my looks, he might’ve taken a liking to me and kidnapped me to serve as his mistress. Thank goodness he’s too old to play these days. We boatpeople have all been saying we don’t see him come down on private business anymore.” She pressed a hand to her heart. “Phew, what a relief.”

Her story didn’t mean much to Gu Mang, but it left Mo Xi feeling rather awkward. Yue Juntian was a lustful man; all of Chonghua knew it. Ultimately, the animosity between the younger members of the Yue Clan—between Murong Chuyi and Jiang Yexue—was the result of Yue Juntian’s philandering. Even so, Mo Xi hadn’t expected Yue Juntian to have such a poor reputation among commoners as well, down to the girls of his own

fiefdom. Evidently, these girls viewed him as a villain in a horror story and spoke of him this way in private.

But the boatmaiden was right about Yue Juntian's fickle nature: if not for the decline of his health in recent years, he would have likely produced a third heir after Jiang Yexue and Yue Chenqing.

The boatmaiden's inhibitions had fallen almost completely away as she chattered on while steering the boat. "Ah, but it's no wonder Old Man Yue prefers it here. Lin'an is full of beauties, and there are some girls who really are stunningly gorgeous. I've seen them plenty of times washing vegetables and silk down by the water. They were lovely, only a little less beautiful than me."

Mo Xi felt his head begin to ache at these words, but Gu Mang was wholly unperturbed. He took a few more bites of the dried fish and said, "Miss, you're really pretty."

The boatmaiden was elated, beaming as she returned the compliment in a flirtatious tone. "Xiao-ge, you're pretty dashing yourself."

Gu Mang turned to Mo Xi. "What does dashing mean?"

"It also means you're pretty."

Gu Mang nodded and told Mo Xi, "Then you're the dashingest on the boat."

For a while, Mo Xi couldn't muster a response, yet he couldn't just leave it be. He turned away, gazing at the glimmering river split by the reeds, and coughed lightly.

As they neared Lin'an City, the number of boats on the river increased visibly. A canal city was, after all, different from the capital; vessels and oars were everywhere, with elegant women washing silks, fishermen singing at dusk, and the residents who made homes along the river swimming in the water. Mo Xi saw a child no older than four splashing happily in the waves like a sharpbelly fish. "Such a strong swimmer," he couldn't help remarking.

"Of course. The children of families that live along the river learn to swim before they can walk." The boatmaiden giggled. "Remember to gather

all your things before you step off—when you see more fishermen wading ahead there, we'll have reached the port of Lin'an."

After thanking her, Mo Xi asked, "Miss, you've encountered so many people—have you ever heard of a reclusive cultivator in the mountains of Lin'an who knows the Rebirth technique?"

He'd thought her innocent and naive, uninterested in immortal techniques or cultivation, and asked as a shot in the dark, without real hope of an answer. Yet unexpectedly, the boatmaiden cocked her head. "Is that one of the legendary three forbidden techniques?"

Mo Xi's heart leapt into his throat. "Exactly so."

"Oh…some of my passengers mentioned this legend before. There's supposed to be an expert in the technique outside Lin'an City."

"Do you know where exactly?"

The boatmaiden shook her head. "That I don't know. My shifu once said birth, aging, sickness, and death are unavoidable. Could there really be such a technique as Rebirth? I thought it sounded too farfetched and didn't take it seriously. If you're interested though, why not go into the city and ask a cultivator? That old lordy Yue Juntian came to the fiefdom recently to recover his health and offer sacrifices, accompanied by his family. It'd be better to ask those Yue cultivators instead of me."

Her eyes were clear, placid with the easygoing calm only commoners possessed. In truth, she was right. If one lived drifting upon the world's waters, a slow and leisurely life, what need was there to fixate on arcane matters of life and death? But for Mo Xi and Gu Mang, this kind of quiet tranquility was something they were doomed never to attain from the moment they were born.

At the port, Mo Xi paid the boatmaiden while Gu Mang looked longingly at the burlap sacks she'd hung beside the mast. Noting the direction of his gaze, Mo Xi bought a sack full of little dried fishes from the girl. Only then was Gu Mang appeased, clutching the sack and chewing as he followed Mo Xi through the streets of Lin'an.

"Steamed cake, lotus cake, osmanthus cake, our cakes take the cake __"

“White magnolia, white magnolia for sale!”

Such sights were not to be found in the capital and were unlike anything in the garrison at the northern frontier. Gu Mang’s neck craned this way and that. Though he didn’t speak, his feet would slow, and he would stand stock-still and stare when he saw aught he liked. In no time, Mo Xi’s qiankun pouch was filled with a baffling assortment of trinkets. From bamboo dragonflies to little clay figurines, tiny porcelain cups and delicate silk fans, a great heap all jangling and clanking together.

Mo Xi had originally planned to make straight for the Yue Clan’s Lin’an residence to pay them a call, but seeing the light beginning to go, he changed course and turned to Gu Mang. “We’ll get a room at an inn first, and I’ll take you out for dinner. How does that sound?”

Gu Mang had a sugar-lacquered tanghulu berry dangling from his mouth. He nodded.

The two of them found an inn by the river. They had come at the end of the lotuses’ bloom; the inn’s windows opened to an endless sea of jade-green lotus leaves. Dragonflies zipped over lush flowers, and seedpods arched over the water on graceful stems. Mo Xi left the eclectic pile of items in the room, then led Gu Mang downstairs to question the inn staff.

One of the servers was wiping down tables in the hall. Upon seeing Mo Xi, he bowed and offered his greetings.

“Could I trouble you with a question?” asked Mo Xi. “Which restaurant serves the best food in Lin’an?”

The server was a discerning man. Seeing that their robes, though subtle in design, were of the finest quality, he put on a broad smile. “Aiyo, honored guests, I’ll be frank—the tastiest might not be the most expensive. Some of the noisy street stalls make the best fried dishes, but I worry the two honored guests might not enjoy the experience.”

Mo Xi turned to Gu Mang. “Do you want to go somewhere with good food, or somewhere nice to sit?”

Gu Mang was straightforward: “Can’t it be both?”

Mo Xi looked a question at the server.

“If you want the place to be nice and the food to be good, you’ll have to compromise,” the server answered. “Once you leave the inn, turn left and cross three big streets—you’ll see a tailor’s shop. Jiuxiang Restaurant is in the second alley to the left. There’re two floors, nice and roomy; the dishes aren’t the best in the city, but they’re up there.” After a pause, he chuckled. “The owner used to be a boat trader, so they’ve got delicacies from all Jiangnan’s major cities. Their crystal shrimp balls and sweet-and-sour mandarin fish are the highlight. Oh, and don’t forget about their pear-blossom white wine—the fragrance is exceptional. They make the best wine in Lin’an City.”

“Do you want to go there?” Mo Xi asked Gu Mang.

Gu Mang still hadn’t put down his sack of little dried fishes. He nodded, chewing on a tail.

The two thanked the server, and found the restaurant without much trouble. The establishment was a large one, with a more open and spacious atmosphere than other restaurants, likely because the location was slightly off the beaten path and the rent was lower. They asked for a table on the second floor, ordering the recommended specialties as well as other small dishes, plus a jug of wine and some desserts.

The food arrived quickly. The shrimp balls were pale and lustrous, each tidy parcel of plump shrimp gleaming translucent on a white porcelain plate spread with green lotus leaves. The sweet-and-sour mandarin fish, velveted in starch, was bright and savory. A poke of the chopsticks revealed tender flakes of luxuriant white fish; when dipped in the sugar-and-vinegar sauce sprinkled with minced ginger, it was indisputably delicious. The pork in garlic sauce was also a house special, with three layers of pork belly first boiled then sliced thinner than a cicada’s wing. The slivers were then frozen in an ice chest, such that they emanated wisps of cold vapor upon being set upon the table, the unctuous fattiness of the pork completely locked away. But when dipped into light soy sauce and peppercorn salt, the flavor was cool and refreshing, each layer of meat and fat clearly defined.

Even the selection of stir-fries was delectable. The fried pork kidneys were neatly curled into pretty rolls, and seemed to cling to the sparks of the stove even as they were brought up. The tender bamboo shoots were crisp

and tasty, and the jade-green vegetable soup was palate-cleansing, serving as an extraordinary appetizer.

Mo Xi noticed that Gu Mang especially liked the shrimp balls. In no time at all, he'd nearly emptied the plate. Mo Xi thought to catch a waiter's attention to order another. But as he turned his head to flag down a server from the restaurant's lower level, he saw, on the first floor, a familiar figure. He wore robes of white, his expression cold and solemn as he spoke to the owner.

Murong Chuyi? Mo Xi froze in astonishment at the coincidence. But now that he thought of it, Murong Chuyi had come to the fiefdom of Lin'an with the Yue Clan. He might not be spending all his time with Yue Juntian and the rest, but what was he doing out here alone in the city's alleys?

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Chapter 163:
The Chu Clan's Past

MURONG CHUYI LOOKED deeply upset. He had always been a graceful person with the aloof bearing of an immortal; rarely did his features reveal any sign of excessive emotion. Even when he'd argued with Yue Chenqing on Bat Island and stormed off in a rage, his emotions hadn't shown on his face. Yet at this moment, Murong Chuyi was like a frozen lake at the start of spring: things he had once sealed in ice could no longer be hidden beneath the surface. Despite the distance between him below and where Mo Xi and Gu Mang sat above, his agitation was plain.

"What? You're asking about a family that lived at the dock more than thirty years ago?" The owner had a prosperously large gut and fingers that never stopped clacking away on his abacus. Engrossed in calculating his income, he mumbled absently, "Aiya, I *was* a boat trader once, but so many families lived near the port of Lin'an. At least eighty, if not a hundred. How could I remember each and every one?"

"The family had the surname Chu."

"There're plenty surnamed Chu," the shopkeeper grumbled. "That's a common surname in Lin'an."

A family named Chu, from more than thirty years ago? Mo Xi thought it over and recalled: Yue Chenqing had mentioned during the Dragon Boat Festival that, in recent years, it seemed Murong Chuyi wanted to find his birth family. But he had so few clues to work from—he knew only that Murong Huang had found him in front of a temple with a scrap of paper tucked in his swaddling clothes, the word "Chu" inscribed crookedly within. Beyond this, he had nothing else.

Men of the Murong line were customarily given single-character names, while the women had character pairs. But Murong Huang had been frail in her youth, and the fortuneteller proclaimed she would have a better chance of survival with a boy's name. To this end, the emperor granted an exception to this branch of the family, and Murong Huang was named thusly. Murong Huang had always felt double-character names were

prettier, and after she took in this foundling, she included in his name the *Chu* his family had left for him: Murong Chuyi.

Evidently, Murong Chuyi had learned more clues about his origins and come to this restaurant to ask the owner about these old events. Undeterred by the owner's dismissal, he took a golden cowrie from his qiankun pouch and pushed it forward with two fingers, just shy of the shopkeeper's hand. "Could you think a little harder?"

As soon as he saw that golden cowrie, the shopkeeper's pudgy hand stilled on the abacus. Scooping up the money, he looked up with a smile. "Good sir, you're far too generous. To be honest…"

His smile froze the instant he saw Murong Chuyi's face.

"What is it?" asked Murong Chuyi.

Some sheet of bedrock seemed to shake open in the depths of the owner's memory. He stared at Murong Chuyi in a daze, his expression one of wide-eyed bewilderment. He gasped, "It's you?" Then quickly shook his head. "No no no, is it her?" He scrubbed at his face. "No, are you her…"

The shopkeeper rambled in incoherent confusion, but Murong Chuyi seemed to have understood nevertheless. He stepped forward and grabbed the man's arm, his phoenix eyes flashing. "You know something," said Murong Chuyi. "Something about what happened more than thirty years ago, at the port of Lin'an."

The restaurant owner looked as if he was dreaming; only after a long moment did he recover his senses. Feeling the curious gazes of the customers and workers all around him, he retrieved a handkerchief and wiped his flabby face with trembling hands. "Xianzhang, first…first, follow me upstairs. I'll organize my thoughts… I'll organize my thoughts, then I'll tell you when we sit down."

The two walked toward the stairs.

Gu Mang saw that Mo Xi's sword-like brows were knit and followed his line of sight. "Do you know that dashing man in white?" Having just learned the word "dashing" from the boatmaiden, he put it to immediate use for the beautiful Murong Chuyi.

"I do," said Mo Xi. "So did you, but you've forgotten."

“Oh, should I go say hello?”

Mo Xi grabbed his wrist to pull him back and shook his head. “He has his own private matters to attend to. Besides, neither of us are very close to him. Greeting him now will be awkward,” Mo Xi said softly. “You should finish your dinner.”

The sound of footsteps came up the staircase. The shopkeeper led Murong Chuyi into a private room; though Mo Xi and Gu Mang couldn’t see them, the sound of their voices grew clearer and clearer as they took a seat just on the other side of the wall. Porcelain clinked, followed by the soft sounds of pouring tea. The owner’s weak voice drifted out from behind the bamboo screen. “If I might be so bold as to ask, when were you born, sir?”

Murong Chuyi told him his birth year. The owner murmured it again and again, as if making a mental calculation, then sighed. “Might it really… Might it really be as she said back then?”

Though his voice was smooth as rain-soaked jade, the emotion in it seemed like flowing magma. “If you know something, why not speak?”

“I…ah, I can’t be certain, but with your looks…” As the owner spoke, he heaved another sigh. “All right, all right, I’ll just tell you what I know. It is indeed an old affair from more than three decades ago…”

He began slowly, his voice wandering as if lost in thought. “More than thirty years ago, I came to the canals of Lin’an to trade. I was poor back then; I never knew where my next meal would come from. Sometimes, when the hunger became too much, I’d pick up pieces of pastry or bites of steamed bun people had tossed on the ground.

“One day, as I was picking up scraps of steamed buns on the dock, the boss of a little restaurant on the riverbank spotted me. He was a kind man; he let me sit in his shop for a while, and cooked me a bowl of fried rice with some seaweed and dried shrimp soup.

“That old man had two daughters and a son working in his shop, helping him run the business. His eldest daughter fried the rice, I still remember—she put in a spoonful of lard and a big ladle of soy sauce. It was a big bowl filled to the brim, fragrant and steaming… When I was strapped

for cash, I'd go there often to eat, but it wasn't like I was freeloading. After I ate, I'd help their family with whatever they needed around the shop."

They heard the muffled sounds of tea being sipped. The owner took a few gulps, steadied himself, and went on. "This family was named Chu; all of them were very kind. The youngest, the boy, was still little, but those two sisters were the most renowned beauties in Lin'an. As soon as they reached fifteen, no few wealthy merchant lords came knocking to propose marriage. But their papa adored them; those merchants would never take his girls as their first wives because of their low status, and the old man refused to marry them off as concubines. He'd rather let them choose their husbands than be hastily wed to a rich man.

"Unmarried maidens celebrated for their beauty naturally draw the greed of others. The sisters' reputations grew and grew, and their prospective suitors became harder and harder to turn away. In the end, some overbearing noble lords came. When playing nice didn't work, they took the maidens by force."

"And then?"

"And then…" The shopkeeper let out a heavy sigh. "In truth, I didn't see what happened with my own eyes. I started working in shipping around that time and had spent a month in Quanzhou doing business. By the time I returned, the Chu family's restaurant had been burnt to ash."

Murong Chuyi tensed.

"I asked the neighbors what had happened, but they were evasive, too afraid to say much. I was so young back then—so furious and overcome by grief—I rushed over to the magistrate's office and reported it. The governor told me that because the Chu family couldn't handle that crowd of suitors, they had left Lin'an."

Murong Chuyi's low, cool voice contained an audible note of fury. "Why would they burn down their house if they were moving away?"

"That's what I thought too," the owner agreed. "It was obvious that the officials were lying to me. The Chu family had shown me so much kindness; I couldn't let it go without knowing the truth. I sought out clues in Lin'an City and asked around… But then…then…"

"What happened then?"

Despite the decades that had passed, when dredging up these old memories, the shopkeeper seemed agonized; his voice shook, and he took many more sips of tea. Finally, he lowered his voice. “Then…I went on the search myself. Finally, on the outskirts of Lin’an City, I found… I found the Chu patriarch’s body, decapitated in a haystack…”

At this point, the man began shivering, the rims of his eyes red. He did not dare, nor did he want, to describe the specifics of what he’d found that day. After a turn or more, he continued. “I was terrified and heartbroken. As I wept, I suddenly heard—there…there were faint sounds coming from the depths of the haystack. I crawled over to look, and found the family’s son hiding in the hay, looking at me like a lost kitten, covered in blood.”

Listening to the tale, Mo Xi was incensed. At the same moment, the crash of breaking porcelain carried through the bamboo screen. The owner cried out, “Xianzhang, you—”

In his fury, it seemed Murong Chuyi had accidentally shattered the teacup in his hand.

“Your hand, your hand is bl-bleeding…”

“It’s nothing,” Murong Chuyi replied tonelessly.

Silk rustled. Perhaps he’d produced a handkerchief to wipe the blood. Moments later, he instructed in a low voice, “Keep talking.”

The owner acquiesced, eyes red-rimmed. It had been many years since he’d thought about these events; his emotions surged as he recalled them. “The boy was too young—he couldn’t answer any of my questions coherently. When I asked him where his sisters went, all he did was cry. I buried the Chu patriarch. I took the child away and brought him up on my boat. At that point, he wasn’t old enough to remember what had happened. I wanted him to live a peaceful life, so I never mentioned his family’s fate, in hopes he could grow up without feeling the need to seek vengeance…

“Years passed. Eventually, the child, who could barely speak at the time, no longer remembered this event. Everyone in the city gradually forgot the Chu family too, until one day…” He paused. “The eldest daughter returned.”

The owner sighed again. “But she was completely unrecognizable. Her hair was a tangle and her face was dirty. She’d gone mad—she told anyone who would listen that she had a child, but she’d abandoned the babe in a moment of confusion. People would ask her, *What child? Who’s the father?* But she couldn’t answer. When they asked where her sister had gone, she only wept. ‘Don’t blame me,’ she would cry. ‘I had to.’”

The owner pulled out his handkerchief, blew his nose, and lamented, “When the local officials heard, they took her in for questioning. But after they confirmed she’d suffered some significant psychological blow and was unlikely to recover her senses, they stopped bothering with her. The townsfolk found her pitiable and gave her an abandoned little house to live in. At first, many went to visit her, but they slowly realized she was only capable of saying those same mad things. Once they tired of her, no one was willing to pay her any attention.

“I did bring her little brother to see her, but he didn’t recognize or remember her. As soon as she saw him, she began sobbing, saying she shouldn’t have been so cruel to abandon her own baby, that no matter how much hate she felt, she shouldn’t have blamed the child. She said she saw the little boy become a ghost, sitting in a pool of blood, staring at her. Ah…

“Though there wasn’t any evidence, I’d put the pieces together well enough. The Chu family hadn’t moved away at all; rather, some wealthy noble from the capital must have taken a liking to the daughters and snatched those two maidens away. Perhaps their father had tried to protect them and was brutally murdered, while the little son was tossed in the pile of straw and left for dead.”

The shopkeeper fell into a long, dazed silence. “The elder Miss Chu kept saying she had a child, begging her sister not to blame her, crying that she had her own difficulties. Eventually, everyone began to think she’d done something she shouldn’t to stay alive, that she killed her own sister… They thought this was why only the elder Miss Chu returned, while the younger Miss Chu had vanished without a trace.”

Murong Chuyi’s expression darkened, as if he was unwilling to accept this as the truth.

“Based on these speculations, the townsfolk ostracized her, mocked her, and took advantage of her madness. Back then…back then, I didn’t

stop them, because I didn’t know either. It was always the younger Miss Chu who was warm and sweet to me. Her elder sister was a quiet girl. I thought she might really have done something terrible to her sister, only to be driven insane by the guilt that gnawed at her. It wasn’t until the end of her life that I learned—”

Stunned, Murong Chuyi cut in, his voice hoarse. “What? She’s… already gone?”

“This was quite a while ago…” The shopkeeper said ruefully. “I went to see her off when the time came. Perhaps it was a final flash of lucidity—she had a few moments of clarity right at the end. She told me…”

The owner stopped for a moment, as if weighing whether to tell him these final, most closely held secrets. At last, perhaps because he was looking at Murong Chuyi, whose face was so similar to the woman he’d once known, he finally spoke. “She told me that when she and her sister were taken by that noble, she knew she couldn’t escape. She pretended to be docile, undressing and serving him without complaint, coaxing him into letting down his guard. Finally, she found an opportunity to set her sister free. But her sister thought her mask of obedience was real—she thought her sister had forgotten the need to avenge their father’s death and willingly gave her body to their captor to preserve her own life. Thus, her younger sister despised her; she said she’d rather die than accept this favor from her. That was when I finally knew all the townsfolk had mistaken the elder Miss Chu. She hadn’t killed her sister to live at all. When she said ‘I had to,’ she meant…

“She had urged the younger Miss Chu to run, but her sister rejected and misunderstood her. They were living in the imperial capital, surrounded by terrifyingly powerful noble houses; the elder Miss Chu worried about how far her little sister could get even if she listened to her and fled.

“The elder Miss Chu racked her brain over days and nights. In the end, she came up with an idea. She’d met quite a few young lords when she was serving that noble, and her final plan was to set up a scheme: she would get one of them to take in her sister. To give the younger Miss Chu a better life, to spare her suffering and disgrace, she watched those nobles carefully. She considered who might warmly accept an orphaned girl. That noble had

to be kind, righteous, and notable, with a sufficiently powerful position. In the end, she narrowed it down to two."

"Who?" Murong Chuyi asked.

"Fuling-jun, Mo Qingchi, and the late Wangshu, Murong Xuan."

Caught entirely off guard, Mo Xi's phoenix eyes flew wide.

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Chapter 164:
We Aren’t Alone

MO XI HADN’T EXPECTED to hear his father mentioned in this recounting of past events. For a moment, he couldn’t say what it was that he felt.

“After painstakingly asking around,” the owner continued, “the elder Miss Chu learned Mo Qingchi had a wife with a jealous temperament. Thus she pinned all her hopes on the unattached Murong Xuan.”

“But,” Murong Chuyi said softly, “if that…younger Miss Chu was so strong-willed, why would she go along with her elder sister’s plans for her? If she learned all of her elder sister’s planning and suffering had been for her sake, how could she be willing to escape into a life of ease?”

“Precisely,” the shopkeeper replied. “So the elder Miss Chu’s plan… was to not let her sister know at all. She hoped her sister could live the rest of her life happily and without pain. One day, when all the nobles of the city went out to hunt on the outskirts of the capital with their entourage, she made sure her sister was by her side. While her sister was distracted, the elder Miss Chu put some filched memory-erasing powder into her water.

“When the youngest Miss Chu drank the memory-erasing powder, she fell unconscious. The elder Miss Chu secretly carried her to a path she knew Murong Xuan would cross. Murong Xuan saw a solitary woman on the verge of death, piteous and helpless. Of course he felt compassion. He ordered his men to save her.

“Now that she had accomplished this, however, the elder Miss Chu knew all of her previous fawning and flattery would be seen through. She risked everything and fled in the night. But she hadn’t gotten far before the noble who seized her discovered what she’d done and flew into a rage. He sent people after her. In the course of her desperate flight, Miss Chu fell down a steep hill and landed in the Abyss of Five Poisons.”

“That fog-filled gully in the eastern outskirts of the capital?” Murong Chuyi muttered.

“That’s right… By the time Miss Chu climbed out, she had inhaled too much of the poisonous miasma. Her mind was beginning to deteriorate. But Xianzhang, you should know that the effects of that type of poison fog aren’t all immediate; it becomes worse and worse as the days go on. While Miss Chu still had some awareness, she hoped she might return to her papa and little brother in Lin’an, and attempted the journey. But by the time she reached a populated area and asked around, the news she received sank her into despair. She grew madder by the day, and when she discovered she was pregnant with that noble’s flesh and blood, she broke down completely.”

The room was terrifyingly quiet. By now, even Mo Xi had realized that Murong Chuyi was the child of Miss Chu and that nobleman who had forced himself on her. Gazing at Mo Xi, Gu Mang asked in a low voice, “Why do you look like that?”

Mo Xi shook his head. He didn’t wish to hear any more; if he could, he would’ve taken Gu Mang and left. But making their exit now would likely attract Murong Chuyi’s notice, and Mo Xi hadn’t the faintest idea of how to face him at that moment.

Within this nerve-wracking silence, Murong Chuyi asked, his voice flat, “Why didn’t she abort the child?”

“I can’t tell you why,” the owner said. “I’m not sure she could’ve said what she was thinking either. But…ah, love and hate are never so straightforward. Isn’t it said there’s but a moment’s difference between a saint and a sinner? My own guess is that she struggled a long while to decide whether she should keep the child—so long that it was too late to end the pregnancy. Perhaps that’s why she later left the infant at the gates of a temple.”

Murong Chuyi closed his eyes.

“Before her death, Miss Chu told me again and again how she’d hidden in the forest and watched as a finely dressed woman brought her baby away. She’d felt immensely relieved, but also heartbroken. When the pain became unbearable, she began to regret her choice. She wanted to chase after the woman and claim her child, but the noble lady had already left in her carriage. Miss Chu couldn’t catch up no matter how she tried, and no one would listen no matter how she shouted. That was the last straw that destroyed her. That night, she went completely insane.”

At this point, the owner’s eyes went distant. It was a moment before he was able to continue the story. “As for that youngest son of the Chu family…that boy grew up working for me on my boat. Later, when I got on in years and wanted to live a steadier life, I came to Lin’an and opened this restaurant. But he’d fallen in love with the water; he’s still trading on the river to this day, doing the same job I taught him. I never told him the details about what happened in his youth.”

Murong Chuyi’s voice came out as a rasp, slow and deep. “How is he doing now?”

“He has a wife and kids; he’s living a peaceful life. He says he wants to work hard while he’s young and put some money away. In a few years, he’ll bring his wife and kids back to Lin’an to start up a business so his kids can focus on their studies.”

After a silence, Murong Chuyi spoke again. “That’s good to hear. Sir, do you know which noble kidnapped the Chu sisters?”

The owner’s expression changed; his pudgy lips opened and closed on a stammer. Though he hadn’t mentioned the man’s identity during his retelling, he obviously knew who he was. But reminiscing over a rumor was one thing; naming names and exposing that man for a monster was another matter entirely.

Everyone had their own sense of right and wrong. Some people could only go so far for justice; they hadn’t the courage for more. Still, what they were willing to give counted as kindness; it wouldn’t do to press further. Murong Chuyi was only too aware of this reasoning, and anyhow, he didn’t need confirmation of his suspicions. He already had an answer in mind.

Who else could it be? Even Mo Xi, never one to involve himself in other people’s business, could guess the identity of that beast with ease.

Murong Chuyi noted the owner’s expression and didn’t insist. “I understand. Thank you, sir.”

“No, ah, not at all… There’s nothing to thank me for.”

There was a beat of silence. Then the two spoke almost at the same time:

“Sir, could you please answer one more question?”

“Xianzhang, could I be so bold as to ask one last thing?”

Murong Chuyi said, “Go ahead.”

The restaurant owner began, hesitant, “You…you wouldn’t really be…Miss, Miss Chu’s child from back then…right?”

There was no reply.

“N-never mind,” the shopkeeper hastily amended. “Ah, pretend I didn’t say anything, pretend I didn’t say anything. Back to your question—what did you want to ask me?”

Murong Chuyi was quiet a moment. “My question was…in this area of Lin’an prefecture, are there many families who tattoo newborn children with a symbol on their shoulder?”

Hearing this, Mo Xi froze.

“Oh, the people along the river have always liked their tattoos. There is an old custom like that, but not everyone follows it.” The shopkeeper continued, “Actually, the practice goes way back to their ancestors. I’m not sure of the exact details, but I heard that long ago, the ancestors of some of these families worshipped flower deities. They chose a type of flower as their family’s symbol for warding off evil and asked a famous cultivator to leave a mark on their arm. For example, the ones that worshipped herbaceous peonies got an herbaceous-peony-shaped mark, while those who worshipped tree peonies got a tree-peony-shaped mark.”

The more Mo Xi heard, the worse his expression became. By this point, his face was almost white.

“The famous cultivator who made these marks back then used a very potent technique. Not only were those devoted believers marked with sigils, the flowers were even passed down to their children, who were born with the same birthmark. But the enchantment is ancient; each family’s marks have slowly faded down the years. The weaker ones are no longer visible. In a few more generations, I think all the birthmarks will be gone.”

Murong Chuyi spoke again. “Then, that family surnamed Chu…did they also inherit and pass down a mark?”

The shopkeeper thought for a moment. “Yes.”

The atmosphere was terrifyingly strained. “What was it?”

“A lotus flower.”

Thunder seemed to rumble through Mo Xi’s head; he felt a vertiginous rush as his vision went dark in bursts. He looked up through the restaurant’s flickering candlelight and gazed into Gu Mang’s totally oblivious face.

Lotus flower… A lotus flower…

Snatches of past conversations seemed to flit through Mo Xi’s head like a carousel lantern: the rumors about the late Wangshu and a maiden from Lin’an, the lifelong conflict between Gu Mang and Murong Lian, the faint resemblance between Murong Chuyi and Gu Mang… In the end, a refined and measured voice echoed from his memories. Jiang Fuli’s words from not so long ago, when he was treating Gu Mang’s wounds—

“Hm? This petal-shaped mark on his shoulder… Why do I feel I’ve seen one just like this, but on a different patient?”

It had been on Murong Chuyi. He must have seen Jiang Fuli for an illness at some point, and Jiang Fuli had noticed the birthmark on his shoulder.

Mo Xi felt cold surging from the depths of his bones. The truth seemed to be an ocean pouring out into the world, inundating Mo Xi until he could scarcely breathe.

He buried his face in his palms as gooseflesh rose over his back. Murong Lian, Murong Chuyi, the late Wangshu, the Chu sisters, Gu Mang… And that servant woman Gu Mang had once mentioned—the one Mo Xi hadn’t paid much notice to at the time—Auntie Lin. This one thread wound through all the tangled relationships among all these people, dragging the truth to the surface. Their connections gradually became clear, but it was a terrifying clarity. Mo Xi’s entire body was as cold as if it had been submerged in icy water.

“Mo Xi? Mo Xi!”

He didn’t know how much time had passed when Gu Mang’s worried voice yanked him from his thoughts. Mo Xi blinked and looked toward Gu Mang’s pretty face in the candlelight.

Mo Xi had been preoccupied so long that Murong Chuyi had already taken his leave of the room next door. The owner had also made his way downstairs and was now welcoming guests once again with his portly belly and a newly rearranged smile.

It was as if Mo Xi had dreamed it all. But he knew it wasn't so; all of it was real.

In the Time Mirror, he'd watched Gu Mang and Lu Zhanxing's final farewell. Gu Mang had yearned so deeply not to be alone, to have a brother to keep him company.

He remembered, too, something Yue Chenqing had once said—that Murong Chuyi had been alone since he was an infant abandoned at the temple; he'd never known his family, or whether they were still alive.

Between the two of them, one was cold and one was warm. One had hoped fervently, one had sought in silence. They seemed to have nothing in common, but as it turned out… As it turned out…

Trembling, Mo Xi closed his eyes.

"Mo Xi, what's wrong?"

"Nothing…" Mo Xi replied in a rasp; it was impossible to say whether the emotion roughening his voice was sorrow or joy. The joy was self-evident. As for the sorrow—in Gu Mang's current state, how could he endure the shock of learning about his family and come to acknowledge a brother? Not to mention, when he looked at it from another light, Gu Mang would be saddled with the rotten accounts of both the Yue and the Murong Clans.

Mo Xi's emotions were in turmoil; he was unsure of what to say. He patted Gu Mang on the head and asked, "If…if you still had kin in the world, would you be happy?"

"What's kin?" Gu Mang asked.

"They're the people closest to you."

"Then there's only you."

"What if there was someone else?"

“But there’s no one closer to me.” Gu Mang widened his eyes. “If there was, why haven’t they come to find me?”

“He…” Mo Xi paused. “He will.”

They returned to the inn, but Mo Xi wasn’t tired. He stood before the window, gazing at the round disc of the early-rising moon and the frost on the eaves of the houses, countless questions running through his mind.

The noble who had done those despicable things to the Chu sisters was almost certainly Yue Juntian. Given Murong Chuyi’s temperament, Mo Xi didn’t know what action he would take, but the result was sure to be devastating to both the Yue Clan and Murong Chuyi.

If he wished to stop Murong Chuyi from taking the desperate risk of revenge, the best choice would be to tell him he still had a brother of his own blood in this world, and that this brother needed him. He didn’t know Murong Chuyi well, but even he could see Murong Chuyi, like Gu Mang, wanted badly to know what it was to have a home. Between the cold satisfaction of revenge and lasting warmth, he trusted Murong Chuyi would choose the latter.

In truth, that would be better for all of them.

“Mo Xi.”

Mo Xi turned his head at his name but found it was nothing more than Gu Mang murmuring in his sleep. He was already curled up in the bed, the thin blanket pulled so high a scant sliver of his face was visible. He was dreaming, his brow furrowed.

Padding over, Mo Xi sat on the edge of the bed. He reached out and gently brushed away the untidy wisps of hair around Gu Mang’s face.

Despite the slightness of his movements, Gu Mang sleepily opened his eyes. Mo Xi kept his voice soft and gentle, very low. “Did I wake you?”

Gu Mang shook his head muzzily. After a moment he mumbled, his clear blue eyes heavy-lidded, “Do I really have…a big brother too…?”

After a pause, Mo Xi hummed in assent.

“Will he really come to find me…?”

“He will.”

“Will he like me?”

“Of course he will.”

Gu Mang hummed softly, the wrinkle in his brow slowly smoothing away. A touch of relief and anticipation appeared on his features.

In the dimming light, Mo Xi sat next to Gu Mang, watching him as he slept soundly, still thinking things over. The minutes dripped by. At last, Mo Xi tucked the thin blanket more tightly around him. He rose and left the inn in silence, walking toward the graveyard on the city’s outskirts.

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Chapter 165:
Graveyard Meeting

AT DUSK, the crows cawed in the withered trees. A man in robes like snow stood before one of the stooped little limestone plaques in the graveyard on the outskirts of Lin'an. Hardly anybody had bothered to clean the gravestone, and it was covered in a thick layer of grime. The text on it had been carved shallowly; the writing at the bottom was almost too worn to read.

Murong Chuyi regarded it in silence. The restaurant owner had kindly erected this stone plaque for his deceased friend. It bore no epitaphs like *Caring Mother* or *Beloved Wife*. Only three simple words were carved on top: *Chu Lian's Grave.*

He had found it by following the owner's instructions. After all the twists and turns in his thirty-some years of life, he was finally meeting his birth mother for the first time. Once, he had resented his mother's coldness in abandoning him at the temple. He had borne a grudge; he hadn't understood what she'd gone through to make her so cruel.

But he hadn't known the truth of it.

Murong Chuyi knelt slowly before Chu Lian's gravestone, fingertips brushing the light dust covering the stone plaque. He thought to call her *Mother*, but as his lips moved, he found he could make no sound.

In more than three decades, he'd never called anyone Mother. Now there was suddenly a grave that he could address by this name, but he could no longer say it easily. Such a simple word, yet it stuck in his throat like a sharp fishbone, pricking out a cutting ache. He could not speak no matter what.

He gathered himself for a moment, closing his eyes. Spiritual energy flared at his fingertips; little by little, he traced over the three words. Stone dust whispered as it fell away, and the shallow markings on the gravestone became deep once more, as if every line and stroke was carving itself into his heart.

Chu Lian’s Grave.

So that was her name.

Next to Chu Lian’s gravestone was an older plaque, this one without a name. It was the grave the owner had erected for the murdered Chu patriarch, out of gratitude for the meal he’d once freely given. The owner, afraid the officials would find out what he’d done, did not even dare inscribe it, only carving a small lotus flower on the stone.

Murong Chuyi lifted a hand to touch his own upper left arm through his pristine white clothes. He had always wished for a home. These two gravestones in this dark cemetery were the result of his arduous search. It was so terribly cold.

Of course, the thought of seeking out the boy who survived had crossed his mind. But upon hearing that he was surrounded by his wife and children, with a full and blissful life, Murong Chuyi felt it would be incredibly awkward if he suddenly inserted himself, just as it always was with the Yue Clan. That person’s life was already complete; there was no need for him to mar it with an unnecessary brushstroke.

He remained kneeling before the gravestone. His emotions, usually so clear-cut, were a chaotic roil. Hatred, resentment, dissatisfaction, disappointment, pain—his heart was near to bursting with these feelings. He couldn’t think clearly about anything; in the end, he merely sat in shock.

The moon was bright, and the stars were scattered and few. Crows called out from the desolate branches. He reached up to touch his mother again. All he felt beneath his fingers was that icy gravestone. Cold, like the home he’d found.

The Chu family hadn’t moved away at all; rather, some wealthy noble from the capital must have taken a liking to the daughters and snatched those two maidens away. Perhaps their father had tried to protect them and was brutally murdered, while the little son was tossed in the pile of straw and left for dead.

In the course of her desperate flight, Miss Chu fell down the slope and landed in the Abyss of Five Poisons.

In the outskirts of Lin’an City, I found… I found the Chu patriarch’s body, decapitated—

The words of the tale from earlier seemed to echo in his ears like a curse. Hatred welled up in his breast, and he rose, a ball of flaming light coalescing in his palm.

Without warning, the soft press of footsteps sounded behind him. The newcomer stopped a few paces away and called in a low, steady voice: “Murong-xiansheng.”

Murong Chuyi turned, eyes sharp and voice fierce. “Who goes there?!”

Mo Xi stood between two rows of gravestones, gazing at him from a respectful distance.

Narrowing his eyes, Murong Chuyi asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Earlier this evening, I happened to be at Jiuxiang Restaurant as well.”

Murong Chuyi’s expression went sharper still. His features were fierce at the best of times; at this moment, he was intensely wary, eyes filled with menace, so that he seemed even more unapproachable than usual. “You overheard—”

“I overheard.”

Golden light exploded from Murong Chuyi’s palm and transformed into a blade sharp enough to split hairs. Swordlike brows drawn low, he wasted no time on talk before sending a flaming sword glare sweeping toward Mo Xi with a swipe of his hand.

Mo Xi threw up a barrier and blocked the glare; golden light clashed with the barrier’s red glow. Mo Xi gazed at Murong Chuyi through the spray of flickering sparks. “Murong, I didn’t come to fight you, nor do I consider myself an ally of Yue Juntian. If I did, there’d be no reason for me to seek you out.”

Murong Chuyi’s attack had failed; sweeping his sleeves, he drew his hand back and brought the sword up in front of him, face showing distrust. “Then what did you come for?” He narrowed his phoenix eyes dangerously. “To plead for mercy on Yue Juntian’s behalf?”

“You probably know I’ve always been at odds with him.” Murong Chuyi didn’t respond, so Mo Xi continued, “He and I have served in court together for many years, but I have never joined his faction nor developed any friendly relationship with him. I’ve hardly ever spoken to the man. You must be aware of this.”

Murong Chuyi remained silent, but the hissing spiritual energy radiating from the sword seemed to lessen. After a while, he brought the sword behind him, but his face was still tense as he stared at Mo Xi. “Yue Juntian is inept and without morals. He’s tyrannized his fiefdom for years, resulting in the destruction and death of many families here. I must settle this debt with him.”

Mo Xi nodded. “If I were you, I would do the same.”

“Then why do you stand in my way?”

“If I didn’t, would you not go after Yue Juntian tonight and kill him with your own hands?”

“Do I not have this right?” Murong Chuyi snapped.

“What justice would your mother or grandfather get if you dealt with your personal grudge like this? Murong, you know the right thing to do is to report this to His Imperial Majesty; Yue Juntian harms the civilians of his fiefdom with his own selfish desires. He’s committed great sins, hidden his tracks, and lied to the emperor. These are severe crimes that His Imperial Majesty will not tolerate.”

Murong Chuyi glared at him through red-rimmed eyes. “So what if he doesn’t tolerate them. Will he execute him? Will he take his worthless life? He won’t. He’ll give him a slap on the wrist, and then this blood debt will be written off. Do you think I haven’t considered this? Besides,” he said icily, “don’t speak to me of how His Imperial Majesty will deal with him according to the law. Where was the law when Yue Juntian raped my mother? Where was the law when he killed my family? The law didn’t stop him from doing these things, but now that it’s my turn, I must obey it, is that right?”

Mo Xi gazed at him for a long beat. “Very well. If you’re not willing to listen to me and insist on exacting personal vengeance, go ahead.” With that, he moved aside. “I won’t stop you. But, Murong, have you thought

through the consequences of what you plan to do? Yue Juntian will be dead, and you'll have your revenge. But you'll certainly be given the death penalty. Perhaps you think such a sacrifice is worth it, but what about Yue Chenqing? Yue Juntian is still his father, no matter how despicable he is. And you have always been the fourth uncle he reveres. You would murder his father, then end up in prison, to be executed when the time comes. What effect do you imagine this will have on Yue Chenqing?"

Murong Chuyi's expression darkened slightly. "I have never considered Yue Chenqing my nephew. What does his happiness or unhappiness have to do with me?"

"Is that so? How merciless," Mo Xi said. "Then why did you risk your life to save his on Bat Island?"

"I—"

"If you settle your personal feud with Yue Juntian, the Yue Clan will fall apart, and Yue Chenqing will suffer for it. Besides, other than…" Here, Mo Xi paused. "Other than Yue Chenqing, there's someone else who wouldn't want you to spill blood so rashly."

"Do you mean that surviving son of the Chu family?" Murong Chuyi looked up. "Then you're wrong. He has a wife and children—his life is going well, and I have no plans to disrupt it. Whether I spill blood or not, whether I kill Yue Juntian or not—none of it has anything to do with him."

"No," Mo Xi said. "Someone else."

Murong Chuyi looked at him, puzzled.

Mo Xi glanced at the gravestone. "Chu Lian's younger sister was rescued by the late Wangshu-jun. Though she's no longer with us, she left a child in this world. Your cousin."

Murong Chuyi stood frozen for a moment, as if he couldn't comprehend Mo Xi's words. By the time he processed them, his phoenix eyes had widened.

"You ought to have heard the old rumors about how the late Wangshu was in love with a maiden from Lin'an," Mo Xi continued. "Yue Juntian repeatedly admonished them before the emperor until the two were forced to part. That maiden was none other than Chu Lian's younger sister."

“She and the late Wangshu…had a child?” Murong Chuyi asked in near-disbelief.

“Yes,” Mo Xi replied. “Once you know the whole story, it’s not hard to imagine why Yue Juntian worked so hard to malign her and prevent her marriage to the late Wangshu. Although Chu Lian had given her sister memory-erasing powder, its effects may not have been permanent. Yue Juntian feared there’d come a day when Chu Lian’s sister would regain her memories and reveal everything to the public. With the late Wangshu at her side supporting her, Yue Juntian wouldn’t find it so easy to scheme and lie his way out of that scenario.”

Murong Chuyi waited for him to continue.

“Chu Lian’s sister, her child—your cousin—is just like you. He’s been alone for more than thirty years. Murong-xiansheng, he needs you. He wants to acknowledge you, too.”

Under the moonlight, the face of this usually indomitable man was white as paper; even his thin, pale lips looked bloodless.

“How did you find out…?” Murong Chuyi asked.

“It’s hard to explain, but I ask you to believe that I do not lie to you. His shoulder bears the same mark as yours, the same as the one on this gravestone. An identical lotus-petal mark.”

Murong Chuyi’s face was ashen. “Who is it? Murong Lian?”

“No. It’s Gu Mang.”

Murong Chuyi’s silk shoes shifted as he took an involuntary step back. “Him? How…how could he… How could he…”

“He’s not a traitor, nor is he evil. But the reasons behind what happened to him are difficult to explain. The black magic energy in him is growing stronger day by day. If he should receive another destructive blow, he might lose his mind and transform completely. I can support him by remaining by his side, but you’re his family by blood. There are some things you can give that I never could.”

Murong Chuyi’s gaze flickered, as if he was suppressing some emotion that was about to break him. A complex expression played over his face. “Did he come to Lin’an with you?”

“Yes,” said Mo Xi. “He’d be very happy if you were willing to acknowledge him. Murong, Gu Mang is different. If you think others don’t need you, there’s nothing I can say to that. But *he* needs you. It’s been thirty years. Let him call you Ge.”

Murong Chuyi closed his phoenix eyes. After a while, he raised his head, speaking hoarsely: “Xihe-jun, I’ve always kept my distance from people. I know nothing about being someone’s family. And there’s my blood feud with Yue Juntian…”

“So you’d rather lose a brother so you can personally avenge a crime that happened more than thirty years ago?”

Murong Chuyi pressed his lips into a tight line. After a long silence, he finally relented. “I can meet with him. But everyone in the Yue Clan is offering sacrifices in Huntian Cave tomorrow. I can see him the day after.”

Mo Xi inwardly sighed in relief. “Okay. I’ll tell him that.” Since Murong Chuyi hadn’t refused, Mo Xi ventured, “Then, as for Yue Juntian…”

“Rest assured.” Murong Chuyi lowered his eyes. “Regarding Yue Juntian… I’ll deal with him after I see Gu Mang.”

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Chapter 166:
Cousin

WHEN GU MANG heard the news that he really did have a cousin, and that this man would come see him the day after next, he was surprised and delighted. Such undisguised happiness had rarely appeared on his face since his mind had been damaged; his spirits seemed to have lifted quite a bit. For the rest of the evening, he peppered Mo Xi with questions.

"Mo Xi, what's my cousin like?"

Mo Xi wanted to give him something to look forward to, but he didn't want to give away too much. "You'll know when you see him."

"Oh…" Sitting in their room in the inn, Gu Mang played with a bamboo dragonfly for a while. "Then, when I see him," he said, turning back to Mo Xi, "what should I say?"

"You can say whatever you want; there are no rules."

"Well, what do you talk about when you see your cousins?"

"…I don't have any cousins." Mo Xi set down the book he'd been holding and gazed into Gu Mang's wide blue eyes. "You don't have to worry so much," he said. "He's your big brother, not your enemy."

Gu Mang seemed to be deeply relieved. But soon after, he looked down at his clothes, ran to the copper mirror to assess himself, then ran back over to Mo Xi and tugged on his sleeve. "Clothes."

"Hm?"

"I want new clothes. So my cousin will be happy when he sees me."

Mo Xi held back a laugh in spite of himself. "New clothes? Are you getting ready to propose?"

"What does *propose* mean?"

"I was joking." Mo Xi got to his feet. "Stay here in the inn and rest. I've put up a defensive barrier, so it's safe enough. I'll go out and buy you a new set of clothes."

Gu Mang nodded several times.

Mo Xi departed. He had no trouble picking out clothes for Gu Mang, for he knew the circumference of Gu Mang's waist as well as he knew the back of his own hand. In no time at all, he was stepping out of the best clothing shop in Lin'an with a tidy paper package.

Upon returning to the inn, he passed the package to Gu Mang. "Try it on—see if you like it."

The robes were pure white, with subtle cloud patterns picked out in snow-silk thread. Their cut was simple and clean, with an ethereal grace. In his army days, Gu Mang had always preferred to fight hand-to-hand, and so preferred narrow-sleeved and close-fitting martial robes. After he became a prisoner, he never had the chance to wear nice clothes. This was the first time he'd worn this type of loose-fitting, wide-sleeved cultivator's robe in glimmering silver.

He stepped carefully out from behind the screen, afraid he'd tread on his hems if he moved too quickly. He came to a stop in front of Mo Xi, his blue eyes filled with unease. "It feels…a little strange."

His hair was tied in a loose bun as usual. The soft, dark wisps framing his face made his skin look very pale, and his eyes very clear. Dressed thus, the similarities between him and Murong Chuyi were indeed striking.

"It looks good on you," Mo Xi replied gently. "You're just not used to it yet."

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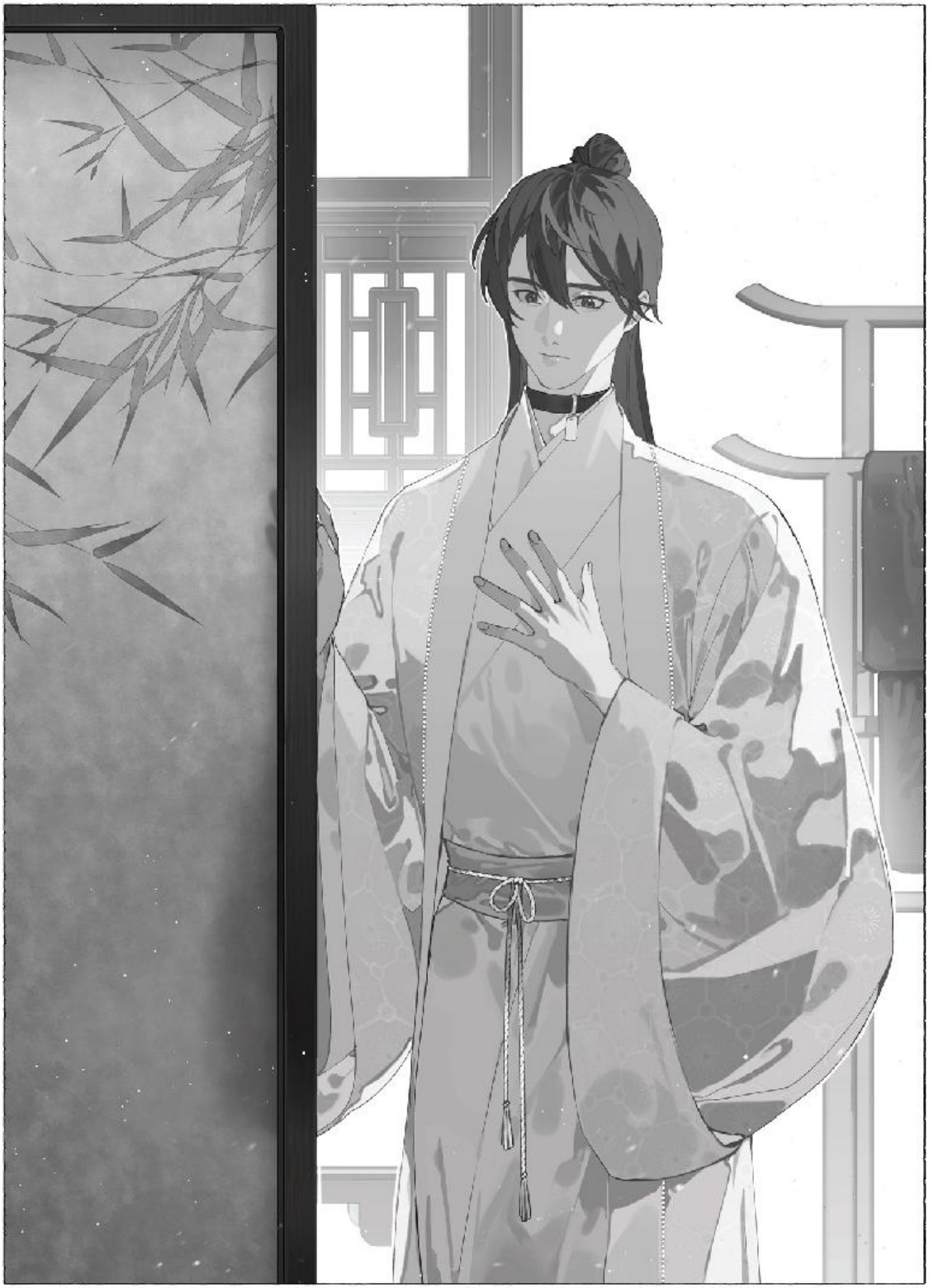

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“Really? It looks good?” Gu Mang echoed with some astonishment.

“Mn.” Mo Xi smiled. “Keep wearing it, and you’ll adjust.”

Gu Mang nodded in delight. Yet after a moment, he ran behind the screen again. When he walked back out, he had changed and was carrying the snow-silk robes in both hands.

“What is it?” Mo Xi was taken aback. “You don’t like it?”

“I’ll get it dirty.” Gu Mang carefully folded the clothes and picked up the brown oilpaper packaging on the table. His lashes fluttered as he blew a speck of dust off attentively, packaging the robes back up and patting the bundle solemnly. “I’ll wear it the day after tomorrow.”

Even after the demonic energy had ravaged his mind, his yearning for familial closeness was abiding, as though carved into the marrow of his bones. Mo Xi watched Gu Mang place the paper-wrapped robes at the head of the bed. A few minutes later, he decided to hide them under his pillow instead. After another few moments, he unearthed the package and examined it again, reaching in to gingerly touch the fabric, an expression of uncertain anticipation coming over his face.

He busied himself with this oilpaper package for the remainder of the evening, having lost all interest in the bamboo dragonfly and other trinkets they’d purchased earlier. Even when it came time to sleep, Gu Mang couldn’t relax, piping up in a small voice every few minutes:

“Mo Xi, does my cousin wear clothes like this too?”

“Mn. This style is his favorite.”

“Mo Xi, is my cousin pretty?”

“Could *your* cousin be ugly?”

“Mo Xi, the day after tomorrow is tomorrow’s tomorrow; I still have to wait a day. Can’t I see him before then?”

“There are some personal things he has to attend to. Once he takes care of them, he’ll be able to come see you with his mind at ease.”

“Okay, then tell him to take his time then. No rush.”

“Mn.”

“Mo Xi…” Gu Mang’s barrage of questions gradually trailed off. He still wanted to talk about his big brother, but was simply too sleepy to continue. With a yawn, he mumbled Mo Xi’s name one last time and dozed off before he could finish the thought.

The next day, Mo Xi rose early, while Gu Mang was still curled up in bed. A city’s busiest hours were the morning and night markets, and Mo Xi planned to canvass for information about the legend of the Rebirth technique. But though he encountered many citizens during this investigation, none were interested in cultivation. They could tell him which stall had the cheapest tofu or freshest vegetables, but they didn’t know anything about an elusive grandmaster cultivator living near Lin’an City.

Mo Xi was unsurprised by this result. If that hidden cultivator were so easily found, he wouldn’t be considered hidden. He uncovered no clues about the Rebirth technique, but an enthusiastic old lady did tell him which stall had the best breakfast, so Mo Xi went.

By the time he arrived, a bustling crowd had already gathered. He found a seat in a corner and called to a server with a white handkerchief draped over his shoulder, “One each of your specialty breakfast items, please.”

“All righty!” the server cheerfully answered.

Mo Xi’s method of ordering might’ve sounded wasteful, but it wasn’t really. Breakfast stalls could only sell so many items, and one of each wasn’t too much for a grown man who hadn’t yet eaten this morning.

The head chef worked quickly. Before long, each dish was brought over in turn: The pork wontons in clear soup were plump with fine-minced filling, the shrimp shumai were full and bouncy, the osmanthus sticky-rice balls were soft and sweet, and the eel noodle soup was rich and brightly flavored. The fried fish was golden-brown and fragrant, paired with rice-vinegar dipping sauce that cut through the grease, enhancing the mild flavor of the fish. Among the assortment of delicacies were fried dough sticks unique to Lin’an City, consisting of a snow-white layer of dough, thin as a cicada’s wing, wrapped around two crispy dough sticks and pressed flat on the grill with green onion sandwiched between, the whole spread with a

thick layer of tianmian sauce. Every bite was shatteringly crisp with fried dough and lightly sweet with sauce.

After Mo Xi had tried them all, he ordered seconds of the items Gu Mang would like and asked the waiter to package them up. As he sipped his soup and waited, he heard the Yue Clan's name from the neighboring table.

"I saw them early this morning," said an older woman. "Yue Juntian took the entire Yue Clan to that Huntian Cave on the outskirts of the city. Aiyo, I'd just come back from picking wild greens and bumped into their honor guard right at the gates. It gave me quite a fright."

"What are you afraid of?" the farmer next to her teased. "Worried Old Man Yue's going to snatch you up and make you his concubine? Old Yue's all about a pretty face. You're middle-aged now; he wouldn't look twice at you. No need to worry."

"What do you mean he wouldn't look at me?" raged the woman. "So what if I'm middle-aged; I've still got it! Eat your noodles instead of wasting your breath being rude!"

A second man at the table chuckled. "But I heard Yue Juntian's health is getting worse every year. He got around plenty when he was young, but now he has no energy for it."

"That's right," the woman said. "You guys didn't see him—his face was waxy yellow, like someone dug him out of a coffin. But aiyo, his two sons sure are handsome. Too bad one of them's a cripple."

"Do you mean Jiang Yexue? He's here too?"

"'Course he is. This is the only time he's allowed to travel with the Yue Clan since he got booted out of the family. It's the Huntian Cave sacrifice ceremony, after all."

There was an out-of-towner at their table who didn't seem to know much about Lin'an or Yue Manor. He'd remained silent as the other talked, but at this point, his curiosity became unbearable. After taking a gulp of soup, he asked, "Friends, what kind of place is this Huntian Cave?"

"It's a burial ground," the woman explained enthusiastically.

"You could say it's a sealing place for resentful spirits," the farmer added.

The out-of-towner widened his eyes incredulously. “Ah… Resentful spirits?”

“Yep. This is an old story from Lin’an City. When Chonghua was first founded, Lin’an wasn’t part of its territory—it was held by a barbarian tribe. Back then, those barbarians were cultivating with dark methods and imprisoned most of the civilians from Lin’an in the cave. They were gonna kill them and then refine them into resentful ghost soldiers. But those barbarian cultivators didn’t have the ability to back up their ambition. They slaughtered ten thousand people or more; their corpses piled into mountains and blood flowed in rivers inside the cave. Those people resented their unjust deaths all right—too much. The barbarian cultivators couldn’t control them. The ghosts lashed out and devoured the barbarians, then escaped the cave, rampaging across the land.”

“What happened next?” the out-of-towner exclaimed.

“Chonghua sent a grandmaster artificer—Yue Juntian’s ancestor—to suppress the ghost soldiers who’d gone berserk,” the farmer said. “This Yue-qianbei[1] was smart, and refined a magical tool that could repel spirits. In the end, he sealed those vengeful ghosts in the blood pool within the cave and formed a blood contract with them, requiring the malicious spirits to obey the orders of all Yue Clan descendants. The cave where they were sealed became known as Huntian Cave.”

The out-of-towner wasn’t stupid and immediately asked, “But that cultivator must’ve paid a hefty price, no?”

“That he did,” the woman said mysteriously. “Let me tell you—they say every three years, the head of the Yue Clan has to offer up a massive amount of his own spiritual energy to appease these ghost soldiers. He can’t stop until he steps down.”

The out-of-towner gasped. “Jie, you just said Yue Juntian’s sick.” He hesitated. “Does he have enough spiritual energy to feed these ghosts?”

“No way,” the woman replied. “But I heard the head of the Yue Clan can give an offering of blood if he has no other choice. That means he’d pour fresh blood into the pool, while the rest of the family kneels and offers worship alongside him. This can temporarily settle the ghost soldiers’ restlessness.”

The out-of-towner squirmed. “How much blood would they need…”

“Too much, that’s for sure.” The woman made an exaggerated gesture. “That’s why this type of sacrifice ceremony requires the whole family to accompany him—after Yue Juntian offers up his blood, he’ll be weak. He’ll need his blood relatives to gather qi for him and cast spells or something… In any case, it’s all that mystical stuff. Otherwise, do you think he’d allow Jiang Yexue to come with them to Huntian Cave for the ceremony, considering how bad his relationship with his son is? He’s got it all planned out!”

Realization dawned, and the visitor hastily nodded. “I understand, I understand. I hadn’t expected there was a legend like this about the Yue Clan in Lin’an. If I hadn’t met you all, I never would’ve heard about it.”

The farmer waved a hand. “Each feudal lord and fiefdom has its own stories. They’re not secrets, exactly, but no one knows them better than the locals. For example, here in Lin’an, we know the stories about the Yue Clan the best, because our feudal lord is Yue Juntian.”

“Do you have other stories, then?” the out-of-towner asked with interest. “I’ll treat you to breakfast—could I trouble you to tell me some more?”

These people loved to gossip and couldn’t be happier to share with a captive audience, even if nothing good would come of it. Now that they’d found someone keen to listen to their tales—and willing to treat them to a meal for their trouble—they were delighted. The whole table broke into noisy discussion.

Mo Xi remained where he was, thinking through the details his neighbors had revealed about the Huntian Cave sacrifice ceremony. Unease gripped his heart.

The entire Yue Clan had gathered in that cave. After Yue Juntian made the blood sacrifice, his spiritual energy would be weak. When he considered the truths from thirty years ago Murong Chuyi had just learned…

He pictured Murong Chuyi’s face in the graveyard, indifferent and snow-pale, cold as ice.

I will meet with Gu Mang after I offer sacrifices in Huntian Cave tomorrow. Before then, I won't touch Yue Juntian.

Mo Xi suddenly felt that Murong Chuyi may not have spoken those words with complete sincerity.

At that moment, shocked shouts came from the gates of the bustling market. The early shoppers gave way as a bloodied Yue Clan guard staggered in through the eastern market gates. Half his face had been torn away, the bloody scraps of flesh dangling below his jaw. Terrified women and children scattered like birds at the gruesome sight.

The guard seemed to be dragging himself in the direction of Yue Manor, but he clearly knew he hadn't much longer to live. When he collapsed heavily to the ground, he didn't pick himself back up. Instead, he writhed forward and grabbed the closest bystander. Looking up, he cried desperately, "A…a revolt…"

The man was trembling in terror; his stammer matched the guard's. "Wh-wh-what?"

"Revolted… The Y-Yue Clan…Huntian Cave… He revolted!" The guard disgorged a mouthful of scarlet blood and sank to the ground, dead.

Mo Xi shot to his feet, his expression black as pitch.

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Chapter 167:
Murong Chuyi's Vengeance

THE ENTRANCE TO Huntian Cave yawned out of a barren hill on the outskirts of Lin'an City. When Mo Xi arrived on the scene, he was greeted by the sight of dozens of corpses strewn haphazardly around the mouth of the cave, all of them identifiable as Yue Clan servants.

Mo Xi quickly checked their breathing and found that he was too late to help any of them. As he strode toward the cave, he heard low sobbing behind him. He looked toward the sound and saw a little girl curled up in a ball, covered in blood and weeping in a crevice between the stones.

"Lan-er?!"

The girl was none other than the little disciple Jiang Yexue had taken in. She flinched in terror at the sound of Mo Xi's voice and whipped around as if she'd heard a ghost. Her open eyes were blank. "No, no no… Don't kill me… Don't kill me…"

Mo Xi reached out a hand to her. "Don't be scared. It's me."

"You…" Trembling, Lan-er stared at him through watery eyes for a long time before she suddenly burst into tears and ran into Mo Xi's arms. "Xihe-gege, they killed people inside the cave… They killed people…"

Under normal circumstances, Mo Xi didn't like others touching him, but Lan-er was so young and had endured such a fright—he didn't have the heart to push her away. He reached out to pat her fine hair and murmured soothing words while she cried. After Lan-er had calmed down, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Xiansheng brought me here. He was afraid people would bully me, so he took me with him," little Lan-er said through sobs. "But Xiansheng got bullied himself, so he told me to run…" She let out a quiet wail. "I wasn't good, I was so scared… I really did run away…"

Mo Xi felt his heartbeat quicken. He'd thought Murong Chuyi would take his revenge on Yue Juntian only; he hadn't imagined the situation

would escalate to this point. To Lan-er, he said, “Wait here for now. I’ll go see what’s happening inside…”

But little Lan-er dragged on his arm. “Gege, don’t go! That white-clothed gege… That white-clothed gege is a bad guy; he killed Uncle Yue!”

Mo Xi was instantly shocked. “Murong Chuyi’s already killed Yue Juntian?!”

“Uh-huh…uh-huh uh-huh!” The tears in little Lan-er’s eyes quivered as she nodded. “After Uncle Yue made his blood offering to the monsters in the lake, he—he was so weak he couldn’t talk. Xiansheng and Chenqing-gege were both giving him spiritual energy…but then, I saw the white-clothed da-gege’s expression turn so mean. It didn’t look right, like he was really thinking about something… I was about to warn Xiansheng, but then that white-clothed gege struck… H-he killed Uncle Yue so fast, then summoned all these soldiers made out of bamboo, they killed people left and right… Xiansheng and Chenqing-gege tried to stop him, but he…he didn’t listen at all!”

Lan-er shuddered. “Xiansheng didn’t know if he could beat him, so he gave me a concealment talisman and told me to run outside and hide. I-I was so scared… When I left, Xiansheng and Chenqing-gege were both already hurt…” Little Lan-er’s terror grew as she recounted what she’d seen. She blinked, tears of fear and sorrow streaming down her face. “I hid outside the cave, but I could still hear the sounds from inside. At first they were fighting, but later…”

Her childish voice trailed off, before bursting into a paroxysm of grief. “I couldn’t hear anything anymore! Xiansheng didn’t come out to find me; Chenqing-gege didn’t either! The bad guys won, the bad guys are in the cave…”

She wrapped her arms tightly around Mo Xi’s waist, as if terrified she’d lose the last person she could trust. When she looked up, her eyes were swimming with tears. “Xihe-gege, don’t go inside. You’ll be killed…” she sobbed. “You can’t end up like Xiansheng and Chenqing-gege… Don’t go…”

By now, Mo Xi’s shock had given way to scorn. It might have been easy for Murong Chuyi to kill Yue Juntian in his weakened state, but dealing with the repercussions would have been difficult. The Yue Clan’s

servants and other members of the family would've surely stepped in. In order to free himself, had Murong Chuyi really turned on both Jiang Yexue and Yue Chenqing?

"I have to go," Mo Xi said to little Lan-er. Tears filled her eyes again. "But I'll come back out, I promise. Hide here, I'll—"

But little Lan-er cried out, "I won't! I won't hide anymore!" She wiped her tears with shaking hands. "I've already run away and left Xiansheng behind once. I don't want to hide anymore… Xihe-gege, if you're going inside, take me with you!"

Mo Xi saw how determined she was—she gripped the hem of his robes with her tiny fist, looking as if she wouldn't let go if the sky fell. He glanced at the piles of corpses around them and listened for the clattering of bamboo soldiers. Lan-er's condition was already unstable; she might lose control over her core if her emotions became too much. Without someone to steady her, her condition would spin out of control.

"Then stay behind me," said Mo Xi. "But you have to listen to everything I say. You can't go ahead on your own, understand?"

Little Lan-er nodded again and again.

Mo Xi put her down, and she followed shakily in his footsteps as he walked toward the mouth of Huntian Cave. Together, the two of them opened the stone door and stepped into the chilly, drafty space.

The burial ground extended deep beneath the hill. As they walked, they strode past severed limbs and fallen corpses of the Yue Clan's retinue, piled up on both sides of the path. The air was thick with the scent of blood.

"It's the housekeeper uncle…"

"It's Auntie Chen…"

Lan-er had previously visited Yue Manor with Yue Chenqing; she recognized quite a few of the fallen on this bloody road. At each body they passed, the hand fisted in Mo Xi's robes trembled harder. Mo Xi worried she would go berserk; he preemptively used a spirit-soothing technique on her.

"Xihe-gege," little Lan-er sobbed, "I'm so scared…"

“Don’t be scared,” he said, but Mo Xi’s mood was as dark as could be. At every turn of the path, he worried whose corpse he would see next, if it would be Yue—

“Y-Yue…” Lan-er cried.

Mo Xi’s blood ran cold. He looked in the direction of her pointing finger. It wasn’t Yue Chenqing. But his heart still dropped.

It was Yue Juntian and his younger brother Yue Yongcheng.

These two nobles, once untouchably powerful lords of Chonghua’s imperial capital, lay splayed on the ground like two piles of mud, a single strip of mangled flesh connecting each of their heads to their necks. Blood flowed sluggishly from the gashes, no longer spurting scarlet. The expressions of these two brothers were frozen in fear and fury, but death had stolen the color in their faces. They looked like masks of paper paste, as ghoulish as the surroundings of Huntian Cave.

Little Lan-er shivered, clinging to Mo Xi’s leg. “What do we do…” she whimpered.

Mo Xi kept a watchful eye on her and comforted her quietly, but there was nothing he could do to comfort himself. They’d passed so many corpses as they walked—almost everyone who’d come with the Yue Clan was dead. He didn’t know if he might see Jiang Yexue or Yue Chenqing’s corpse next.

Murong Chuyi’s hatred had been far more vicious than he’d imagined. Mo Xi found himself wondering if something had gone awry during the sacrifice ceremony—had something shocked Murong Chuyi to his core and instigated this rampage? No matter the cause, the situation was past the point of no return. Murong Chuyi had killed too many people.

“Xihe-gege, Jiang-xiansheng is…”

Mo Xi held up a hand to silence her. They continued onward, more tentatively than before. If Yue Juntian’s corpse was here, the sacrificial burial ground must be very close by.

As they rounded a massive stalagmite dripping with water, a familiar voice echoed from the depths of the cave—

“You know the feud between us better than anyone. There’s no need for me to lay it all out for you.”

Murong Chuyi?!

Mo Xi and Lan-er gazed out from behind the stalagmite. At the same moment, Mo Xi reflexively put a hand over little Lan-er’s mouth to muffle her scream.

Little Lan-er was on the verge of a breakdown. At the side of the blood pool roiling with resentful energy, they could see the back of Murong Chuyi’s white-robed figure, longsword in hand.

Before him were two people tied with binding spells. The first sat in a wooden wheelchair, his face bone-pale and haggard—Jiang Yexue. He was wounded heavily: his lotus-root-colored robes were mottled crimson with blood, and his disabled legs were thoroughly drenched in scarlet. The second person knelt off to the side, his face splotchy with tears and his eyes wide and wild. In those eyes were terror and heartbreak, but they were filled, more than anything, with disbelief.

This, of course, was Yue Chenqing. He mumbled under his breath, repeating himself mindlessly, as if his soul had been ripped out. “Don’t kill them… Please… Don’t kill them…”

Jiang Yexue looked up sorrowfully at the man in white. “Chuyi…”

“I’ve told you many times—you’re not worthy of calling me by my name.” Murong Chuyi’s every word was cold as frost.

“…Xiaojiu,” Jiang Yexue amended.

With a snap of his sleeve, Murong Chuyi’s sharp brows drew together in fury. “I am not your xiaojiu either!”

Jiang Yexue closed his eyes. “Even if the Yue Clan had our shortcomings, even if my…father…committed many wrongs… They still shared a life with you for so many years. No matter what you suffered, why did you need to kill off the entire clan?”

Murong Chuyi’s lips parted as if to explain, but in the end, he turned and replied curtly: “What more do we have to say to each other?”

Jiang Yexue was silent.

“The killing has begun,” Murong Chuyi said. “I will spare no one who stands with Yue Juntian today.” He turned back to stare into Jiang Yexue’s eyes. “Including you. And Yue Chenqing.”

Jiang Yexue had no response; he lowered his head. It was apparent he’d sustained serious injuries fighting Murong Chuyi; blood his bound hands couldn’t wipe away stained the corner of his mouth. “Haven’t you killed enough?” he murmured. “If you haven’t, kill me instead. Don’t hurt Chenqing.”

Yue Chenqing seemed to have cracked under the shock. He was still chanting mindlessly, “Stop fighting… Fourth Uncle… Don’t fight anymore…”

“Chenqing used to sincerely admire you,” said Jiang Yexue.

Murong Chuyi was silent for a few moments. When he replied, his voice was chilly. “I don’t need the admiration of anyone named Yue.”

Jiang Yexue closed his eyes, bloodstained lips parting. “I understand your grievance and your hatred of my father. But if Chenqing’s mother hadn’t brought you back from that temple and raised you, would you be standing here today? You remember your grudge against Father, but did you forget Aunt Huang’s grace?”

Murong Chuyi swept his sleeves back, his face a rictus of fury. “I would rather I had never lived at all!”

“Chuyi—”

“I’ve been lost and ignorant, utterly alone, living under the thumb of a monster who disgraced my mother and drove her to insanity. These thirty years have been nothing but an awful joke!”

Jiang Yexue shook his head. “You’ve been blinded by hatred,” he murmured. “Aunt Huang was always so good to you. You remember it all—none of this has been a joke. Even if you’re unwilling to spare anyone else of Yue blood, let Yue Chenqing go on her behalf.” Jiang Yexue, kind and gentle as ever, looked up resolutely into Murong Chuyi’s eyes. “If you don’t, you’ll be the one to regret it in the end.”

“What I’ve regretted most in my life was becoming part of the Yue Clan.” With a wave of Murong Chuyi’s hand, the sword Zhaoxue flickered

with a golden glow and whistled toward Jiang Yexue—

The sword glare threw Yue Chenqing's vacant expression into sharp relief. In that instant, he finally returned to his senses and screamed, "Fourth Uncle, *no*—!"

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Chapter 168:
The Head of the Yue Clan

BLOOD RAN ALONG the flashing blade and dripped upon the ground. The sword glare flickered, illuminating two pairs of eyes. Both were long and narrow phoenix eyes, but one was icy sharp, while the other was emotionless and cold.

Murong Chuyi scowled. “You?”

Mo Xi gripped the blade of Zhaoxue. Despite the defensive barrier in his palm, the power of the holy weapon was too great. Blood oozed from the broken skin of his hand. “Murong, you should stop.”

Murong Chuyi scattered the blade into motes of light and leapt back a few strides. His white robes fluttered as Zhaoxue reformed into dozens of smaller blades; with a wave of his wide sleeves, those sharp daggers shot toward Mo Xi.

Little Lan-er had run out with Mo Xi. She shrieked, “Xihe-gege! Be careful!”

Mo Xi opened a massive defensive formation, shielding the others behind it. Raising his other hand, he commanded, sharp, “Shuairan, come!”

The snake whip exploded from his palm, coruscating with scarlet light. Catching Shuairan in one hand, he retracted his own barrier the moment the onslaught of blades shot past and lunged toward Murong Chuyi, the snake whip Shuairan lashing down.

As he held Murong Chuyi off, Mo Xi cried to little Lan-er, “Help them!”

Lan-er nodded. “Okay…okay!” She staggered forward, first throwing herself into Jiang Yexue’s arms and bursting into tears. Mumbling “Xiansheng, Xiansheng,” she clumsily untied the immortal-binding ropes around his arms.

“What are you doing here…” Jiang Yexue murmured. “How did you bring Xihe-jun…?”

But little Lan-er was too young to explain; she could only weep. Jiang Yexue sighed and didn't press her further. "Don't cry; go help Chenqing…"

"I-I'll go right now!" Lan-er hiccupped between sobs.

She hastily loosened the ropes around Yue Chenqing, who lay on the ground. He was still trembling, though whether out of fury, fear, or bitter disappointment, it was impossible to tell. Little Lan-er helped him to his feet, and Yue Chenqing turned his gaze to Murong Chuyi, locked in battle with Mo Xi. As he watched, the incredulity faded from his face and tears welled up once more, his features racked with torment. His chapped lips trembled, as if he wanted to call out to Murong Chuyi, but before the first syllables of *Fourth Uncle* could spill from his mouth, he dissolved into incoherent sobs. He turned his face away with a whimper, bringing a hand up to wipe his tears away before they could fall.

He walked over to Jiang Yexue, eyes rimmed with red. "Ge…"

Jiang Yexue was startled. In the past, Yue Chenqing had commonly addressed him with *Hey*; even after their relationship improved, he'd only called him *Jiang-dage*. He'd never called him *Ge*. Jiang Yexue looked up from his wheelchair, at a loss.

On the other side of the cave, sparks flew as Mo Xi and Murong Chuyi fought, spiritual energy clashing fiercely. Shuairan was now the snake whip, now its spiritual snake form, a flickering shadow as it battled Murong Chuyi's Zhaoxue. Both combatants were cultivators of consummate skill with unmatched martial techniques, their exchange of blows so quick their forms were reduced to dazzling blurs. But where Mo Xi's style was unerringly direct, like a sharp blade stabbing relentlessly at his opponent's ribs, Murong Chuyi moved with a flitting grace, pressing close from every direction at once to cut off his enemy's options.

The two of them clashed like meteors. When the longsword collided with the snake whip, the cascade of fiery sword qi rattled the cave's stones and shook dust from the rocks.

"Murong, you said you'd see him, that you'd acknowledge him, that you'd consider his feelings. Why did you go back on your word?" Mo Xi asked quietly.

Murong Chuyi's only answer was the press of his blade. Red and gold light shone on his handsome face, reflecting in those icy phoenix eyes. He said not a word, as though the battle spoke for itself.

"Murong, he's still hoping for you to come find him."

With a flourish of his wide sleeves, graceful as drifting clouds, Murong Chuyi retracted his longsword. He leapt delicately back, then lunged forward with his blade held aloft. The snow-bright glare set his pupils aflame. "Zhaoxue, Destroy a Thousand Mountains!"

The longsword in his hand scattered again into countless motes of light, which coalesced into a surging wave of spiritual energy at his back. He floated before it like an immortal in his white robes. Raising his hand, he uttered a single merciless syllable: "Go."

The snowy wave crested and crashed.

Mo Xi's eyes darkened. "Tuntian!" he bellowed.

With the sound of a whale's call, the weapon's massive spiritual form appeared at Mo Xi's command, its translucent body swaying as it swam toward Murong Chuyi's colossal wave. In an instant, the massive whale breached the wave, white rippling outward like reams of silk, its call seeming to echo from beyond time. It opened its gargantuan mouth and swallowed that boundless wall of water whole.

As powerful spiritual energy collided, Mo Xi's black robes and Murong Chuyi's white billowed in the wind. The onlookers closed their eyes against the gale. Mo Xi turned to Jiang Yexue and the others. "Run!"

Little Lan-er began crying again as soon as he heard him. "Xihe-gege…"

"Go, *now*!"

Jiang Yexue coughed up bloody spittle. He said, voice low, "If only I could awaken the ghost soldiers within the blood pool…"

The Yue Clan had suppressed the ghosts in Huntian Cave for generations. These vicious spirits had received the Yue Clan's offerings, and were willing to obey the head of the Yue Clan. Yue Juntian had met his end without warning, and he'd been in poor health; he'd had no chance to summon the ghosts from the blood pool. But with his death, the position of

the head of the Yue Clan passed to its next true-born son—Yue Chenqing, the son of Yue Juntian's first wife.

But Yue Chenqing's cultivation was weak, and he'd spent years slacking off in pursuit of fun. He'd never properly studied the methods for controlling the ghost soldiers, and had no hope of deploying them as his ancestors might have.

When he heard Jiang Yexue's sigh, Yue Chenqing's heart ached as if pierced with needles. Guilt and sorrow tore through his chest. If he could awaken the ghost soldiers in the blood pool, his bofu and all the Yue Clan's servants wouldn't have died. His fourth uncle…his fourth uncle wouldn't have been able to kill so many people. If he could've stopped it in time, things wouldn't have turned out like this—the man he had always admired now completely unrecognizable, fighting in this hellish cave filled with blood. If he had worked a little harder… If he hadn't lazed around and wasted so much time…would it have come to this? Would it have come to *this*?!

Little Lan-er was still weeping. "No…Xihe-gege… I don't want to run away and leave everyone behind again…"

Mo Xi gritted his teeth. "Do as I say. Hurry and go."

But Lan-er was simply too young. After the shocks she'd endured, her volatile constitution was beginning to fray despite the spirit-suppressing technique Mo Xi had used on her. As she cried, tongues of spiritual flames licked out from her heart.

Jiang Yexue furrowed his brow, coughing up more flecks of blood. "Little Lan-er…" If Lan-er went berserk, she wouldn't be able to differentiate friend from foe; the situation would spin even further out of control. In the worst-case scenario, they'd all die here in this cave full of corpses.

As Jiang Yexue sat forward, ready to force his injured body to cast a calming spell on Lan-er's mind, someone stayed his hand with a touch.

"Chenqing?" Jiang Yexue drew in a sharp breath in astonishment.

Yue Chenqing's cheeks were stained with tears, but his eyes were no longer blank. He looked at Jiang Yexue and choked out, "Ge, I'm sorry. It's…it's my fault. I was too lazy…too thoughtless…too stupid. I only

wanted to be a spoiled young master, I never—never worked hard… But this time…" Yue Chenqing choked on a sob, but his gaze was resolute. He took hold of Jiang Yexue's hand. "This time, leave it to me. I'm the head of the Yue Clan now."

"Chenqing, you—"

Yue Chenqing didn't respond as he released Jiang Yexue's hand. Using qinggong, he leapt onto the ghost command platform in the middle of the blood pool.

When Jiang Yexue and Murong Chuyi saw this, both their expressions changed. Calling upon the ghost soldiers of the blood pool was like taking command of an army; the soldiers would only obey someone of sufficient power. Yue Chenqing's abilities were objectively lacking—but if he made up his mind to offer all his cultivation and spiritual energy to take control of them, even detonating his spiritual core, it would be a different matter entirely.

Murong Chuyi must have recognized his determination. He snorted coldly, and golden light flashed from his sleeves to form a talisman seal. A tide of rustling came from outside the cave.

Little Lan-er's sharp eyes were first to take notice. "Xiansheng!" she shrieked. "They're coming again!"

It was soon clear who she meant. Hundreds of bamboo warriors wielding unbreakable blades surged in through the entrance and surrounded Jiang Yexue and the others, while a portion threw themselves toward the platform Yue Chenqing stood upon.

But Yue Chenqing was the heir to the Yue Clan; standing on the command platform amounted to a summons for the ghost soldiers within the blood pool. Hazy figures burst from the surface, howling as they beat back the bamboo warriors seeking to knock Yue Chenqing into the pool. But the bamboo warriors were mindless; when the first wave sank into the pool, their successors fearlessly forged ahead to replace them with no end in sight.

Little Lan-er's spiritual energy was spiking out of control. Jiang Yexue tugged her over and cast a new spirit-suppressing spell, but his

spiritual energy, especially now, was not as strong as Mo Xi's. His efforts had little effect.

"Xiansheng…" Lan-er cried, "Bamboo warriors… You can use them too… You can also…"

Jiang Yexue shook his head, his expression pained. "Chuyi's the one who taught me the technique. My bamboo warriors are like a pile of broken timber compared to his."

Little Lan-er wailed in despair. "Why did this happen…"

Yue Chenqing's face was bone-white as he watched the situation deteriorate. Steeling himself, he summoned a thin blade and cut a bloody line into his palm. He dipped his fingers in the fresh blood and drew a complicated talisman on the spirit-sealing stone in the middle of the ghost command platform. He meant to throw caution to the wind and summon the monsters in the pool.

"Chenqing—!" Jiang Yexue cast about for a way to stop Yue Chenqing, but the blood pool between them had begun to surge and heave; he couldn't get any closer.

"In Huntian, there lies a blood pool…"

"Yue Chenqing! Stop!"

But Yue Chenqing paid him no heed. He sat down and formed the sigil with both hands as he murmured, "In the blood pool, ghost soldiers sleep."

"Yue Chenqing—!"

"Chenqing-gege!"

Yue Chenqing recited the summoning spell without pause. His father had taught him this spell; even now, Yue Chenqing remembered his words:

In the Yue Clan, we are artificer cultivators. We don't need to cultivate methods that consume lots of spiritual energy—save for this one technique, which harms us almost as much as it harms our enemies. As with everything in this world, hard work begets success. Practice this whenever you have some time. As long as you know it well and your foundation is strong, the spell won't do you serious injury.

In Yue Chenqing's recollection, he'd been a child, sprawled out carelessly on a bench as he listened, his eyes flicking again and again to Murong Chuyi, who stood in a faraway corridor speaking to a servant.

"Form the sigil with me," Yue Juntian had said, "then recite the spell. In Huntian, there lies a blood pool."

Yue Chenqing had parroted carelessly, "In Huntian, there lies a blood pool."

"In the blood pool, ghost soldiers sleep."

Yue Chenqing recited that too, his sigil a crooked approximation. "In the blood pool, ghost soldiers sleep."

"If the ghost soldiers wish to pass…"

"If the ghost…"

A gust of wind blew past, shaking the almond blossoms from their branches to fall like rain in the garden. Murong Chuyi, who had finished speaking to the servant, turned around. The sound of the wind had caught his attention, and he'd turned to watch the greenery sway in the garden. He hadn't expected to find Yue Chenqing gazing at him. As he blinked in surprise, Yue Chenqing gave him a brilliant smile.

"I'm teaching you to cultivate! Learn to focus!"

"Aiyo—"

"Stop dawdling and recite it with me!"

Yue Chenqing pouted. "What's the point; why would I need to summon the monsters in Huntian Cave?" He made a show of raising his voice. "If anything happened to me," he cried, "my fourth uncle would be the first to protect me!"

Yue Juntian's ire grew. "Who do you think he is? He's an outsider!"

"No way! Fourth Uncle is the strongest, Fourth Uncle is the best!" the child Yue Chenqing shouted, with no intention of stopping. "He's not an outsider; he's my favorite xiao-jiujiu!"

No matter what happens, he'll be the first to protect me. He's the strongest, he's the best. He's my favorite xiao-jiujiu…

Yue Chenqing opened his eyes, tears streaming silently down his cheeks. He was bathed in the crimson light of the pool. The marks of the curse from the ghost soldier spell crawled up the stone of the command platform, creeping up his feet, twining along his legs, then his waist, spreading across his entire body. Issuing this command with all his strength felt like ten thousand ants were gnawing at his heart, as if a hundred thousand sharp needles were stabbing into his flesh and hooking barbs into his bones…

His father had told him the pain of summoning from the blood pool was the most unbearable pain of all. But that wasn't true.

Through his tears, Yue Chenqing looked toward Murong Chuyi, still embroiled in his battle with Mo Xi. It was just like the first time he'd learned this technique, when he'd gazed through the shower of petals at the white-clothed youth in the corridor.

Yue Chenqing choked on a mouthful of black blood. He rasped, "If the ghost soldiers…wish to pass…"

The image of Murong Chuyi in the rain of almond blossoms became hazier as his own giggling in that bygone courtyard grew more distant in his memory.

Fourth Uncle will always protect me. He's not an outsider.

He…

An awful pain lanced through his heart. He couldn't keep this up for long. His entire body had begun to burn with translucent flames of scarlet spiritual energy. Yue Chenqing slapped his bloody right palm onto the middle of the spirit-sealing stone.

The cave darkened, and a chill wind rose. Vivid scarlet burst from the blood pool in a dozen surges as sharp howling tore through the ground and screeched upward.

Yue Chenqing cried: "Kill all who block the way!"

With this last sharp command, Yue Chenqing fell to his knees on the ghost command platform, heaving up spates of fresh blood. In a daze, he felt a sinister force devouring all the spiritual energy he had accumulated

throughout his life; he grew weaker and weaker as his strength inexorably drained away.

Ghost soldiers leapt from the blood pool in an endless stream. Just as Yue Chenqing, the new master of the Yue Clan, had commanded, they rushed toward Murong Chuyi's bamboo warriors like the tide. Blood splashed, blades fell, broken bamboo flew into the sky, and the clash of combat filled the air. These ghost soldiers were vengeful souls hundreds of years old. No matter how strong the bamboo warriors were, they couldn't hold out under the ghosts' onslaught. Very quickly, the battlefield turned in favor of Yue Chenqing. Those ghost soldiers howled madly as they tore the bamboo warriors apart, then charged toward Murong Chuyi, still fighting Mo Xi.

Murong Chuyi was an artificer; his combat ability wasn't as strong as Mo Xi's to begin with. He was already at his limit. Attacked from both sides, he lost ground twice as fast. One of the ghost soldiers had wrested a blade from a bamboo warrior in the chaos. As Murong Chuyi blocked a blow from Mo Xi, it stabbed ferociously at his back.

There was the dull sound of something tearing.

Murong Chuyi's amber eyes flickered. With his fair face speckled with blood, he was a terrifying sight. He lowered his head to look at the blade coming out through his chest. He paused, swaying slightly. When he looked up at Mo Xi again, there was confusion in his gaze.

"Mo Xi…"

Mo Xi met his eyes and felt an unexpected shiver up his spine. It was the prick of intuition, an inkling that something wasn't right; coldness crawled up along his back and settled at the base of his neck. "You…"

Murong Chuyi's countenance shifted; he knitted his swordlike brows and mumbled, "I… I'm not…"

Before he could get the words out, the ghost soldier pulled the sword out.

Murong Chuyi sagged and choked out a mouthful of blood. His spiritual energy flow had been cut off; he plummeted from the air. Like a white butterfly falling into a spider's lair, he crumpled into the dirt.

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Chapter 169:
Jiang Yexue's Scheme

THE MASSIVE TIDE from Zhaoxue and Tuntian's spirit whale clashed one last time before Zhaoxue vanished with its master's defeat. Mo Xi recalled Tuntian. One moment, the cave rang with pandemonium; in the next, all was silent.

Mo Xi landed back on the ground and walked over to where Murong Chuyi had collapsed, dead or unconscious. If he wasn't dead, he'd been severely injured; his pure-white robes were sodden with blood. He lay motionless, like a broken puppet whose soul had been pulled out.

The bamboo warriors had lost guidance from their master. They collapsed like grains of sand, tumbling across the ground.

The danger seemed to have passed. Little Lan-er was weeping softly as if she'd been granted a second chance at life. Yue Chenqing had given all his spiritual energy and endured grievous injury; he hadn't even the strength to use qinggong to leap back over the blood pool. Fortunately, Jiang Yexue, too, knew how to command automatons; he summoned one of his own bamboo warriors and instructed it to retrieve the debilitated Yue Chenqing from the platform.

"Ge…" Yue Chenqing looked up with difficulty, coughing up bloody spittle as he mumbled weakly. He slowly turned his eyes toward Murong Chuyi. As he looked at his fourth uncle lying on the ground, his face crumpled. He couldn't speak and had no idea how he should feel. Over the course of a scant few hours, it was as if his flesh and bone had been torn apart, then crushed into mud.

In the end, it was little Lan-er who pushed Jiang Yexue's wheelchair forward. The three of them came together in an embrace.

"It's over. It's over now. Chenqing, you've done very well…" Jiang Yexue consoled him in a quiet voice.

But no matter what Jiang Yexue said, Yue Chenqing kept trembling, shaking without any sign of stopping. His wounds needed urgent attention,

and the disaster that had transpired here between Murong Chuyi and the Yue Clan needed to be reported to the emperor as soon as possible.

After a few more words of consolation, they broke apart and approached Mo Xi, who'd been staring blankly at Murong Chuyi all the while.

"Xihe-jun…many thanks. If it weren't for you, everyone in the Yue Clan might've died in this Huntian Cave."

Mo Xi didn't reply to Jiang Yexue. He only shook his head.

As Yue Chenqing drew closer, he found himself looking askance at Murong Chuyi. He didn't know if the sight of Murong Chuyi with his life hanging by a thread brought him more of hatred or of pain. It was as though his spine had been splintered; he doubled over with the ache, sweat streaming down his handsome face.

Lan-er, standing nearby, noticed his trembling growing worse and worse. She looked at him, then at Murong Chuyi, and quietly tried to comfort him. "Chenqing-gege, if—if you have questions for him…I-I have some life-saving medicine here… It's what my papa told me to keep with me, to stay safe…" She carefully drew a small pill out of her sleeve. "I don't know if it'll help…"

She had been trying to support Yue Chenqing, but his weight was too much for her slight figure to bear. She couldn't free a hand to give Murong Chuyi the medicine.

"I'll do it," Mo Xi cut in.

He took her medicine and approached Murong Chuyi. Turning his back to the others, he gave Murong Chuyi the pill. Then he got to his feet. Just as everyone thought he was readying himself to bring Murong Chuyi and the others out of Huntian Cave, Mo Xi suddenly raised a hand.

With a hiss of spiritual energy, a barrier came down, sealing the only exit.

The other three froze in place.

"Xihe-jun…?" asked Yue Chenqing.

Little Lan-er was also confused. "Xihe-gege?"

Jiang Yexue frowned and coughed, regarding Mo Xi with puzzlement.

Mo Xi offered no explanations. “My apologies. I have a few more questions for the three of you.”

No one knew why he had suddenly turned on them, and they all looked back at him, bewildered.

Mo Xi turned first to Jiang Yexue. “Jiang-xiong, when I came back to Chonghua, where did we first meet?”

Jiang Yexue was confused. “It was…Feiyao Terrace. Why?”

Mo Xi didn’t answer. His second question was for Yue Chenqing. “Chenqing, what does your favorite stall at the northern frontier sell?”

Yue Chenqing didn’t understand either, but he hoarsely replied, “… Meat pies.”

Mo Xi looked at Lan-er. The little girl stood there blankly, her bright, clear eyes wide as she gazed up at Mo Xi. “Xihe-gege…”

“You once gave your Gu Mang-gege a present. Do you remember what it was?”

Little Lan-er bit her lip. “I-I don’t.” She hesitated. “Do I have to remember? I-I’ll think really hard!”

“It’s fine if you can’t remember. I’ll ask you a different question. Where did we first meet?”

“I…”

“You can’t have forgotten about this completely, right?”

Lan-er couldn’t answer.

Mo Xi’s eyes darkened. With a flourish of black sleeves, he grabbed the little girl by the neck.

Little Lan-er screamed, hiccupping in panic.

Mo Xi raised his other hand, a white pill held between two fingers. It was precisely that “life-saving medicine” Lan-er had given him for Murong Chuyi. “Did you really think I’d give Murong this medicine?”

He’d become suspicious several moments ago and quickly swapped out the medicine in his sleeve. The pill he’d fed to Murong Chuyi was some wound medicine from his own qiankun pouch.

“You called this life-saving medicine…but I think we should see if this pill is better for controlling people’s minds!”

He pinched the pill to white powder between his fingers. A slim gu worm wriggled out.

Just as expected.

Mo Xi’s expression darkened. “Speak!” He gritted his teeth, grabbing little Lan-er by her delicate neck and staring, sharp as a falcon, into her eyes. “Who are you really?”

Lan-er burst into tears. “I don’t understand! Save me…save me! Chenqing-gege, Xiansheng…”

Seeing that she refused to confess, Mo Xi gave up on his verbal interrogation. He gathered spiritual energy in his palm to probe her directly. Though she looked as if her spiritual energy was surging, he could see now that it was but a thin layer of illusion magic. Mo Xi flinched. Her unmanageable spiritual core had shriveled—she, too, was merely a puppet.

Instinct born of years of combat made Mo Xi yank his hand back, but it was too late. Black qi spread up from his fingertips, a telltale sign of poisoning from the Liao Kingdom’s rigor mortis herb. “You—!”

“Oh, you’re really making things difficult.” Lan-er slipped out of his grasp and retreated a few steps, a sweet smile unfolding across her youthful features. “Mo-xiong, look at you. Why couldn’t you pretend to be dumb? Why did you *have* to get to the bottom of it?”

Her tone was obviously no longer that of a child.

Mo Xi had immediately tried to suppress the demonic poison at his fingertips, but his efforts were futile. The poison from the rigor mortis herb was extremely potent and spread quickly. Within moments, numbness crept over most of his body. Breathing slightly ragged, he watched the little girl as she stood quietly beside the blood pool, the shadows of Huntian Cave flickering behind her.

“I planned to make you a mere witness, but I see you’d rather be a tragic victim.” The girl’s smile was sharp-edged, completely incongruous with her age. “Mo-xiong…” She sighed, drifting into silence.

Another voice continued from behind Mo Xi, its tone menacing. “… You refuse to take the paths open to you on earth and insist on charging into dead ends in hell.”

Straining to endure the poison’s agony, Mo Xi whipped around to look at Jiang Yexue, sitting in his wheelchair. That face was stained with blood, but there was no hint of frailty in his features.

Jiang Yexue folded his hands before him, gazing at Mo Xi calmly. He smiled and cocked his head. “You learned too much. Don’t blame me if you have to die.”

Mo Xi felt a stab of pain that had nothing to do with the poison. He looked at Jiang Yexue’s face and couldn’t make a sound. His vision blurred.

Yue Chenqing’s voice took on a hysterical edge. “Ge…?”

Jiang Yexue hummed his assent, and Yue Chenqing broke down, shaking and clutching his head, too afraid to believe what he’d heard, let alone think deeper. “Impossible… There’s no way! How could you!”

“Fool. Is there anything on earth that’s impossible?” Jiang Yexue smiled gently and got to his feet with deadly calm. He rose from his wheelchair and walked toward them, eyes on Yue Chenqing.

Yue Chenqing’s pupils shrank in his pale face. “You… You were never…”

Standing tall and slender, with his robes of lotus-root cream aflutter, Jiang Yexue was the perfect picture of a refined gentleman—strong as the wind, gentle as jade. In no world would he look like an invalid.

“That’s right, I healed my legs some time ago. I never bothered to tell you.” He raised a hand and a white-gold flame ignited over his palm—the exact color of little Lan-er’s core. Gathering a killing curse at his fingertips, Jiang Yexue turned away from Yue Chenqing and fixed his gaze on Mo Xi.

“Apologies, Xihe-jun. I’ll have to start with you.” With no more warning, he struck.

Mo Xi had expended significant amounts of spiritual energy in his fierce battle with Murong Chuyi, and now he'd been poisoned by the rigor mortis herb. This poison was capable of paralyzing one's entire body within minutes. By the end, the victim wouldn't be able to so much as twitch. Mo Xi had barely managed to resist its effects. As his spiritual energy countered Jiang Yexue's, he looked up, panting. "You…removed her spiritual core…"

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“Wow. You can tell after a single exchange of blows?” Jiang Yexue’s smile remained gentle and refined. “Indeed. If little Lan-er’s unruly spiritual core remained in her body, it would only be a hindrance to her. But after I absorbed its spiritual energy via occult methods, I could put it to much better use healing my legs.”

The golden light in his hand grew brighter and brighter as he spoke, shining oppressively down upon Mo Xi. “Why else do you think I’d take her in? I can’t stand little kids, especially crybabies. They’re really rather irritating.”

The blinding glow illuminated every line of Jiang Yexue’s face with bright light. It was as peerlessly beautiful as pear blossoms in the moonlight, but Mo Xi had never found that face as unfamiliar as he did today. “Jiang Yexue…you’ve gone mad!”

“Some people use the gallbladders of snakes as medicine. I just found a similar method to fix my legs, that’s all,” said Jiang Yexue. “Besides, when I got her from the academy, she was about to have her spiritual core stripped away anyway. Does it matter if was me or the academy that took it from her?”

Two beams of spiritual energy collided, but one was a trickle, while the other was a raging river. Drawing on little Lan-er’s core, Jiang Yexue gradually forced Mo Xi back. “Don’t be so stubborn, Mo-xiong. You’ve wasted too much energy; you’re no match for me as you are.”

Jiang Yexue wasn’t wrong. Sweat beaded on Mo Xi’s forehead as the black qi of the rigor mortis herb crawled upward to his arms and wrists. Mo Xi could no longer even crook his fingers to summon Tuntian.

Suddenly he heard Yue Chenqing’s hoarse shout, full of blackest despair. “Ghost soldiers—”

He intended to use the monsters that hadn’t yet returned to the blood pool to stop Jiang Yexue’s slaughter.

Jiang Yexue’s expression darkened. Yue Chenqing had reached the limits of both his physical and spiritual energy. If he continued using this forbidden technique, the effort was likely to kill him before it had any effect. Yet Mo Xi had been subdued by the poison; at the moment, it was Yue Chenqing who posed the greater threat.

While Yue Chenqing was still coughing blood—before he could say *Obey!*—Jiang Yexue withdrew his spiritual energy from the battle with Mo Xi and launched himself at Yue Chenqing, sleeves flying behind him.

He struck Yue Chenqing to the ground. Jiang Yexue's eyes narrowed with malice. "Yue Chenqing, why are you *always* making trouble for me?"

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Chapter 170:
First Meeting in White Robes on a Snowy Night

YUE CHENQING'S FACE was stained with blood and filth; he'd cried until his tears had run dry. He stared at Jiang Yexue, and a furious howl tore from his throat. "You…tricked me… You *tricked me*!"

"That's because you're stupid," Jiang Yexue replied mildly. He'd been all smiles in front of Mo Xi, but the mirth disappeared when he faced Yue Chenqing. His expression was as cold as crushed ice. Perhaps he presumed Mo Xi had been sufficiently injured—the poison from the demonic herb could not be removed without outside help—and so took Yue Chenqing to be the more serious threat, reserving for him the greater part of his menace and disgust.

He stalked over to Yue Chenqing, staring down at his half-brother. Jiang Yexue was in fact very tall. Straightened to his full height in front of Yue Chenqing, his bearing refined as jade, he emanated a bone-chilling air of intimidation. "You were foolish and brainless, and you didn't trust your fourth uncle. Who can you blame but yourself?"

"That's not true! I was just… I was…"

"Oh, it's not true?" Jiang Yexue sneered. "You *accidentally* summoned the ghost soldiers in the blood pool, then *accidentally* injured your uncle so badly. Is that right?"

Yue Chenqing's face went ashen.

"Yue Chenqing, he was much too protective of you. No—it wasn't just him. You were coddled like an idiot by your father, your uncle, and everyone else in the Yue Clan. That's how you ended up a useless brat who can't even swear properly."

Jiang Yexue grabbed Yue Chenqing by the hair and hauled him up from the ground. He turned and, without a sound, the soulless little puppet Lan-er obediently pushed over the wheelchair. With a grip like iron, Jiang Yexue grasped Yue Chenqing's neck and pushed him into the chair.

He may as well have dragged Yue Chenqing toward a hyena's cave with bones strewn across the ground. Yue Chenqing's hair stood on end as he looked at that chair. Face white, he thrashed in Jiang Yexue's grip and was rewarded with a more vicious shove. In a manner that brooked no resistance, Jiang Yexue pinned him down in the wheelchair.

Jiang Yexue bent, narrowing his eyes and tilting up Yue Chenqing's chin with slender fingers. "Didi, if you grew up in my shoes, you wouldn't have turned into such a naive idiot. You're so stupid it impresses me, did you know that?"

Yue Chenqing was shaking all over. Had Jiang Yexue flayed his flesh from his bones and turned him inside out, he wouldn't feel as mutilated as he did at the moment. The words he wanted to say crowded in his throat: cries of despair, rage, grief, and hatred…but Jiang Yexue was right. Since childhood, Yue Chenqing had been too sheltered, to the point that he hardly knew a single curse word. The paltry collection he had couldn't express these sentiments at all. He felt he would be crushed by these emotions—like he'd already been crushed by them. In his devastation, all he managed to voice was a useless, stammering query. "Why…why did you do this…?"

"Why not?" Jiang Yexue stood before the wheelchair he'd sat in for years. There was an inscrutable glint in his eyes now that it was finally someone else's turn. "Yue Chenqing, we are both of us sons of the Yue Clan. But what was your life like? And what about mine?"

Yue Chenqing lifted his eyes to meet Jiang Yexue's. "Everyone called you a gentleman…" he rasped. "But all along…your heart was full of filth…dirtier than anyone knew…"

All this time, Jiang Yexue had been cold; he'd been indifferent or threatening, malicious or cunning, he'd never shown rage. But this accusation from Yue Chenqing was like a key to the rustiest lock in his heart. The flames of fury he'd suppressed for so long flared to life, igniting his pupils and distorting his face. He spat every word, his venom unmistakable. "*I'm* filthy, a false gentleman?" Jiang Yexue burst into chilling laughter. "Oh, Yue Chenqing, Yue Chenqing… Of all the people in this world, you're the only one who has no right to say such a thing to me. Do you know whom you're talking to?"

Jiang Yexue's laughter shattered and warped as he swept his sleeves back. When he glared down at Yue Chenqing, his eyes were spider-webbed with hateful red veins. He grabbed Yue Chenqing by the lapels and stared viciously into his face, biting out words laced with rancor. "If I hadn't saved you, Yue Chenqing, you'd already be bones in a grave and a soul beneath the Springs! Your life came at the cost of that gentleman's death!"

For too many years had twisted hatred accumulated in his heart with no outlet. When it erupted at last, Jiang Yexue shook from head to toe with loathing. He shoved Yue Chenqing back into the chair so forcefully it rolled backward a few feet.

Jiang Yexue looked up, staring at Yue Chenqing with scarlet eyes. He glanced around at Huntian Cave, that symbol of the Yue Clan's darkest power; he glanced at the ghost corpses that obeyed only the head of the family. His gaze passed over Mo Xi, paralyzed by the rigor mortis herb, passed over the lost and mindless little Lan-er… At last, it alighted on Murong Chuyi, wounded and unconscious on the ground. Jiang Yexue felt his chest had been pierced with a slim needle; the pain was bearable, but it roughened his breathing and reddened his eyes. He turned and leveled a resentful gaze at Yue Chenqing, his eyes narrow with distrust as he repeated those words like a curse: "Your life came at the cost of that gentleman's death."

Yue Chenqing had no idea what he meant, yet the words were enough to turn his face ashen. "What do you mean…?"

"What do I mean?" Jiang Yexue scoffed.

The air was thick with the smell of blood, proof that they were far past the point of no return. Only Jiang Yexue himself knew the truth. If he'd chosen a different path more than twenty years ago, none of this slaughter would have been. All of the Yue Clan—everything he wanted—would have been his.

Twenty-three years ago, two paths had unfolded before him.

One day, his mother had summoned him to her room. Despite the passage of years, he remembered his mother Lady Xie's face, surpassingly beautiful yet sullen. "Yexue, what are we going to do?"

Heavy ambergris incense burned within the room, making his head swim. Madam Xie sat wreathed in expensive fragrance and wrapped in equally exquisite robes. Her hair glimmered with pearls and jade, and her arms, the cream of lotus roots, were decked in gold and silver bangles. In his memories, his mother always dressed with such flamboyant luxury. Whether it looked good or not was secondary—she adored this kind of extravagance, for it represented Yue Juntian's favor. Young and beautiful qin players were as common as grains of millet in the entertainment houses of Chonghua, but how many of them could rise through the ranks to reach her coveted place?

Madam Xie was proud of her past success but fretted endlessly over her future circumstances. She knew Yue Juntian was betrothed to Murong Huang, and her ambition did not stop at being a humble and lowly concubine. She did all in her power to capture Yue Juntian's heart for herself. Not only did she spend her days currying favor with her husband, she arranged for her son Jiang Yexue to be taught by the most virtuous man in the residence, Song-xiansheng. This man instructed Jiang Yexue in both the ways of artificing as well as moral principles to live and act by. As a child, Jiang Yexue didn't often visit his mother. Instead, he went to read books and converse with Song-xiansheng. His old teacher was a kind and righteous man; he taught him to cultivate refinement and modesty, tolerance and elegance.

His mother's efforts weren't for naught: Yue Juntian was infatuated with Madam Xie, and very pleased with Jiang Yexue. When he'd had a cup too many, he'd say that a hundred years in the future, he'd have Jiang Yexue succeed him as head of the Yue Clan and become leader of this renowned artificer family. The mother who heard these words knew they were drunken ramblings, but still she pulled Jiang Yexue closer to kiss him in delight, filled with endless joy.

Despite Yue Juntian's lustful appetites, he was a callous and pitiless person at his core. Madam Xie understood his temperament well. Once that momentary satisfaction had passed, she would remind Jiang Yexue in tones of deepest worry: "Your father treats us well now, but *she's* going to move into Yue Manor sooner or later. As soon as she crosses the threshold, we'll be expected to wait on her. It won't be a pleasant life."

On that particular day, when Madam Xie called him into her room, she tugged him over and gave him a careful once-over. Without warning, she drew him into a tight embrace. “I only have you now… Only you…”

“Mom…?”

The woman swallowed a sob. “Xue-er, Murong Huang… Murong Huang will soon marry into the Yue Clan. On the first of next month.”

Madam Xie released him, but her hands remained tightly wound into his sleeves, as if clutching a pallet of straw that could keep her afloat. She stared at him through scarlet eyes. Those beautiful eyes were no longer charming, filled as they were with stubbornness and hatred. “Xue-er… I won’t accept this… How *could* I accept…”

“Mom…”

“We must struggle, we must fight, we must conquer. Do you understand?”

But Jiang Yexue had no thoughts of fighting or conquering. In truth, he cared nothing for any of it—neither the riches his mother adored nor the status she coveted. He felt he had enough; almost too much, in fact. Were it up to him, he’d choose the leisurely life described in his books, residing in a bustling city yet unbothered by the clamor of carriages.[2]

But when he looked into his mother’s grieving, obstinate eyes, he couldn’t say any of this out loud. He was kind and hated seeing others hurt —and this was his own mother, after all.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “There will be ways. There are always ways. I won’t let her take all your things, and I won’t let you be bullied either. In Yue Manor, you’re the only one who shares my heart. Yexue, Xue-er…my good boy, from here on out, everything I do will be for your sake. You must listen to your mother, do you understand? Everything will return to us.”

He blinked. He was a precocious child: although he didn’t blindly agree with his mother’s thirst for power and wealth, he understood her lowborn origins and knew her path hadn’t been an easy one. He was only too aware of her terror that all her current splendor might come crashing down around her. In his heart, he understood her. It was just that he didn’t care to fight.

On the day Murong Huang married into the Yue Manor, his mother dressed herself beautifully in her finest clothes. She had once been a qin player and was accustomed to flattering and dancing attendance; presenting an exquisite, smiling face posed no challenge to her. She welcomed Murong Huang politely, yielded to her humbly, and fawned over her with all the required submissiveness.

Jiang Yexue couldn’t bear to see his mother like that. When the feast started and the guests filled their seats, he slipped away from the bustling party.

It was past dark, and snow had fallen with the night. He wrapped his fur coat more tightly around himself. The plum blossoms in the garden were in full bloom, so he thought to pick a few branches to place in his mother’s and his teacher’s rooms.

He strolled along the path, steps crunching as he walked over snow. There among the trees, he spied a youth in a scarlet cape over white robes standing in the falling snow, looking up at the old plum blossom tree beside the white-washed wall with its dark roof tiles.

That was the first time he saw Murong Chuyi.

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Chapter 171:
Youthful Days of Tenderness and Budding Yearning

BOTH HE AND MURONG CHUYI were young back then, boyish and immature. He had no idea this child who looked even younger than him was in fact his uncle in terms of family hierarchy. He took him for a young master from one of the visiting families who'd snuck into the courtyard to see the flowers.

The boy looked to be in a foul mood. He was staring intently at the plum blossoms, and hadn't noticed someone approaching him from behind. It wasn't until an umbrella—its canopy of blue-green oilpaper painted with scenes of cranes amid clouds—came over his head to block the snow and obscure his view of the flowers, that he started and turned around.

Jiang Yexue gave him a small smile. "Which family do you belong to?" he asked, in the tone of an older boy coaxing a younger one. "What brings you out here without an umbrella in such heavy snow?"

Murong Chuyi widened his eyes. He took one step back, then two, the expression on his face turning from surprised to haughty. He answered Jiang Yexue's question with one of his own: "Who are *you*? What are you doing here?"

He asked it in a crude and coarse manner, without any courtesy, as if he didn't want to waste breath on Jiang Yexue.

But Jiang Yexue had a mild temper. A gentleman, after all, was like jade, constantly polished and refined. Despite his youth, he was big-hearted and always looking after others, so he only smiled. "My surname is Yue—I'm Yue Yexue. As for why I'm here…it's because this is my home. The plum blossom tree you're looking at is my favorite one."

For some reason, the other boy narrowed his eyes. "Oh? You're Yue Yexue, Xie Yilan's child?"

This youngster called his mother brazenly by name, and he'd even gotten it wrong. Jiang Yexue, despite all his self-restraint, felt a measure of exasperation and offense at this, but he didn't show it. Instead, he reached

out and pulled that youth further beneath his wide oilpaper umbrella. “Listen up, my mother’s name is Xie Lanyi, not Xie Yilan,” Jiang Yexue chided gently. “Also, the snowfall’s getting heavier. If you keep standing here like a fool, you’ll catch cold. Come, I’ll take you back to the reception pavilion to find your parents.”

The boy slapped his hand away rudely. “How uncivilized. Do you know who you’re talking to?”

Jiang Yexue laughed in spite of himself. “Kid, you…”

“Kid?” Murong Chuyi let the hood of his cape fall back, tucked an errant lock behind his ear, and leveled him with a stern gaze. His thin lips parted around his next words. “Yue Yexue, I am your uncle.”

Jiang Yexue’s eyes widened. After a beat, he burst into laughter and reached out to feel the youth’s forehead. “Oh, you,” he chuckled. “Did you get a fever from the cold…?”

He didn’t remember how this farce had ended; many minor details had slipped his mind. All he remembered was that later, Murong Chuyi left with an unhappy sweep of his sleeves. And after the wedding feast, when he followed his mother to the tea ceremony greeting of the mistress of the house, he saw the youth from under the plum blossom tree standing at Murong Huang’s side and looking at him indifferently. Only then did he realize at last that this white-robed youth who looked about his age really was his young uncle.

The boy’s name was Murong Chuyi.

Though they now lived in the same residence, Murong Chuyi kept to himself; it was rare for him to show his face even three days out of ten. At the beginning, Jiang Yexue tried to make conversation with him, but upon receiving the cold shoulder time and time again, he gave up. Song-xiansheng had taught him that the friendships of gentlemen flowed naturally, as water in a stream. Jiang Yexue held himself to a certain standard of refinement; he wouldn’t force it if Murong Chuyi wanted to keep his distance.

But not everyone was as good-natured and kind as his Song-shifu. After Murong Huang married Yue Juntian, Jiang Yexue could acutely feel the attitudes toward him changing, both in and outside the manor. Those

who had used to flock to him were the first to disappear, and as time passed, the smiles of some elders were no longer as warm as they had been.

Jiang Yexue was kind, but he wasn't stupid. He saw all this with clear eyes and understood why it was so. But he was gentle in his dealings; he preferred not to bicker over favor gained or lost, and so he didn't think much of it.

But Madam Xie's resentment grew to consume her, causing Jiang Yexue no end of worry and frustration. Every day, she would harp on the precious trinkets Yue Juntian had gifted Murong Huang and how much they were worth, or what outfits Murong Huang had purchased that day and in which styles… As time passed, her words grew more and more cutting, until her comments did not bear repeating. Jiang Yexue would frown slightly as he listened, but as she was his mother, the most he could do was sigh to himself. It wasn't as though he didn't console her, but the moment he tried to persuade her otherwise, she'd glare and curse him out, exclaiming that he "had no ambition" and "didn't understand suffering."

As time passed, Jiang Yexue learned to hold his tongue. Madam Xie's jealous obsession with Murong Huang grew deeper by the day, and by the time Murong Huang fell pregnant, her once-lovely features had become twisted with hatred. Murong Huang was of royal blood and the first wife; the whole manor was ready to fetch her the moon and the stars to keep her happy. Not even while pregnant with Jiang Yexue had Madam Xie enjoyed such pampering.

The servants could read the writing on the wall, and the difference in their treatment of the two mistresses grew more and more pronounced. Even the attendants Jiang Yexue had favored began to treat him with disdain. Madam Xie's hatred festered. "Look," she said to Jiang Yexue, "you speak of convincing others with kindness, of living well by adapting to our circumstances, but whom have you convinced? How well are you living?"

Jiang Yexue was hurt, yet he persisted in believing that his conduct was correct. Riches and wealth were easily had; a clear conscience was a far rarer thing. But even his father gradually began to distance himself from him in consideration of Lady Murong's feelings. Other than Song-

xiansheng, no one else in the entire residence was willing to associate with him. How could his heart not ache?

Late in the spring of that year, Song-xiansheng took to his bed with illness and couldn't teach him artificing techniques. Jiang Yexue had always revered his teacher and couldn't bear to disturb him in his convalescence; he attempted to puzzle through some work on his own. He took his mechanisms to the other artificer advisors in residence, only to be turned away under a variety of pretenses.

"Sorry, Yexue-gongzi, I still have plenty of work to do today."

"My apologies, Yexue-gongzi, this old man is indisposed. I'll swap tips with you once I feel better. How does that sound?"

"This lowly one still has much to learn myself; I'm afraid I cannot teach the gongzi."

Not a single person he asked was willing to help him. Cradling his wooden mechanisms in his arms, Jiang Yexue wandered through empty corridors in a daze, his head hanging low. Suddenly, he heard someone call his name behind him.

"Yue Yexue."

He turned, all his disappointment and heartache written clear across his face. Much to his surprise, the eyes he met were Murong Chuyi's.

Murong Chuyi furrowed his brow. "What kind of expression is that?" His uncle walked over with white robes aflutter and peered down at the mechanisms in Jiang Yexue's arms. "Your work?"

"Mn."

Murong Chuyi plucked a little water clock from the top of the pile and looked it over. "Eastern blood crystals for the sand, ebony sandalwood for the body… Your own design?"

Jiang Yexue had heard of Murong Chuyi's skill and spoke with some embarrassment. "Yes."

But Murong Chuyi didn't laugh at him. He put the little water clock back on the pile. "Come to my workshop. I'll teach you."

Jiang Yexue had never dreamed that Murong Chuyi would volunteer. His eyes went wide, and he remained rooted to the spot in astonishment.

Murong Chuyi had turned on his heel the moment he finished speaking. He walked some distance before noticing Jiang Yexue hadn't moved. He turned his head, nonchalant. "Hurry up."

"Oh, all—all right."

The days that followed, before Yue Chenqing's birth, were the richest and happiest days of Jiang Yexue's life. Although Murong Chuyi wasn't much older than him, he had a masterful grasp of artificing and taught Jiang Yexue many techniques and secret methods he'd never before fathomed. Murong Chuyi did whatever he liked and cared nothing for public opinion, so Jiang Yexue's popularity and status—or lack thereof—were meaningless to him. Jiang Yexue, on the other hand, was deeply gratified to find a kindred spirit, as when Ziqi met Bo Ya.[3] No matter what his mother said, he went to Murong Chuyi's artificing workshop every day to talk to him.

Madam Xie grew only harsher with him, and her disappointment mounted by the day. She called him unfilial, a selfish social climber. She surmised that Murong Huang must have sent Murong Chuyi to drive her and her son apart, cursing her out as an awful bitch. At one point, she grew thunderously angry after Jiang Yexue objected to her disparaging Murong Chuyi and stopped responding to her son at all. She wouldn't hear any of his explanations, and even refused to let him return to her pavilion to sleep.

Jiang Yexue didn't wish to fight with his mother, nor make a scene and give others an excuse to mock her. Left with few options, he awkwardly approached Murong Chuyi to ask if he could live in his courtyard for a time.

Murong Chuyi glanced around at the items in his courtyard. On the artificing bench was a set of tools, compasses and rulers, that belonged to Jiang Yexue. There was a second stool that Jiang Yexue customarily occupied, and some trinkets on the table that Murong Chuyi had no interest in, but Jiang Yexue used often. He replied coolly, "Isn't it a bit late to ask permission now?"

Jiang Yexue fidgeted in silence.

The two youths also shared times of idleness. Murong Chuyi's fixation on artificing wasn't as single-minded as everyone thought. For example, he'd buy from streetside stalls the palm-sized bamboo warriors that children begged for, then sprawl on the bamboo couch and call Jiang Yexue over for a match. As they fought, he'd come up with the idea for some kind of new magical implement, then stay up the whole night drawing diagrams. Often, he'd fall asleep on his stomach on the floor, compass and ruler still in hand. When he woke, he'd go right back to drawing.

Whenever Murong Chuyi fell asleep like this, Jiang Yexue couldn't resist sneaking a few glances at him. How could this person be his uncle? He was so young and immature; when he drifted off holding his brush, he'd often wake with ink on his face. How silly.

On one occasion, Murong Chuyi woke blearily in the middle of the night after some dream. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he discovered Jiang Yexue gazing at him and asked with impatience: "What are you looking at me for?"

Even Jiang Yexue was taken aback by how warm his own voice sounded when he murmured with a smile, "I think Xiaojiu looks very formidable."

Perhaps Murong Chuyi didn't realize he was joking, or perhaps he didn't hear him at all. He let out a soft snort, long lashes fluttering, and fell back asleep.

It was in that moment, as Jiang Yexue looked at Murong Chuyi, that a vague, terrifying impulse surged to life within him. The thought made him shiver with fear, to the point that he almost fled. At the time, he hadn't dared think about it too deeply—if he had, he'd have wondered how such heinous thoughts could occur to him.

Though they weren't related by blood—Murong Chuyi was just an abandoned child Murong Huang had taken in—the reality of their rank and status was right there in front of him. A true gentleman, after all, would never have such designs on Murong Chuyi.

Several more months of formless uncertainty passed in the same way. And then Murong Huang's child was born. The instant the babe's first wail echoed through the halls, two people in that illustrious family fell into hell.

The first was Jiang Yexue’s mother, Madam Xie. Yue Manor had welcomed its true heir, an infant son born of the first wife. Yue Juntian gave him the name Chenqing—*bright morning*. Chenqing, Chenqing… Murong Huang’s son was light and radiance, the dawn sun rising in a clear and boundless sky. But what of Xie Lanyi’s child? Yexue, *evening snow*. Despite having once blanketed the land in purest white, daybreak reduced it to nothing. Of course her heart broke; of course she felt hate.

The second person was Murong Chuyi. Murong Huang had died in childbirth; in one stroke, he’d lost the elder sister and mother who’d taken him in and given him a second chance at life. His benefactor was gone.

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Chapter 172:
An Accident of Love Brings an End to Fate

AFTER MURONG HUANG'S DEATH, Murong Chuyi grew sullen and silent. It became his custom to lock himself in his workshop, and the only person in all of Yue Manor who could find him was Jiang Yexue.

During the mourning period, Murong Chuyi silently sculpted many clay figures, filled them with spiritual energy, and tinkered with them. He made them mimic Murong Huang's bearing and mannerisms, then enchanted them to walk around in his small courtyard. Jiang Yexue understood he was grieving and spoke little. He merely picked up the diagrams for the little clay people and followed the instructions himself.

But Jiang Yexue didn't only make imitations of Murong Huang. Some of his clay figures resembled Murong Chuyi, and some himself. Some even looked like that newborn child named Yue Chenqing. Those clamoring clay figures crowded around the little courtyard, shouting and bustling, shattering the previously stifling atmosphere.

Murong Chuyi looked at him gloomily. "What do you want? Are you here to pick a fight?"

Jiang Yexue stepped over to him. He had the urge to take hold of his hands, but in the end, he only tugged on his sleeve. "Chuyi, you can't live in Aunt Huang's shadow forever."

Murong Chuyi yanked his sleeve back. "I am not," he snapped.

He turned, as if he didn't want to talk to Jiang Yexue anymore. He went to the mechanism bench, where lay all the scraps of clay left over from making the figures, and slowly closed his eyes.

A gentle voice called out beside him. A hand was plucking at his sleeve, refusing to let go. "Chuyi, Chuyi…"

"I said I'm not! Can't you—"

But he looked over and found that the speaker was not Jiang Yexue, but a little clay figure that looked just like him. It was trying, in its clumsy

way, to cheer him up. “Don’t be sad, don’t be sad.”

Murong Chuyi stared.

“It’ll be okay, it’ll be okay.”

After a beat, the rims of Murong Chuyi’s eyes reddened. He turned to see Jiang Yexue standing beneath the wide eaves of the roof, framed by the leaden sky and petals falling like snow behind him. His robes, the creamy white of lotus root, fluttered in the wind.

The two of them gazed at each other across the distance of the courtyard. Murong Chuyi tried a few times to speak, but all his words died on his lips. In the end, he managed a single quiet, bitter sentence: “Your handiwork is hideous.”

Jiang Yexue burst into laughter, as if some invisible restraint on him had dissolved. He came back toward Murong Chuyi. After a moment’s hesitation, he gave him a quick hug in consolation. “You’re right,” Jiang Yexue agreed. “Xiaojiu, can you teach me how to improve?”

Back then, their relationship had been very warm. Jiang Yexue could still curb his desire, and Murong Chuyi didn’t push him away. Later Jiang Yexue would often wonder—if he hadn’t intervened in what followed, would everything have been different?

In Huntian Cave, Jiang Yexue gripped Yue Chenqing by the neck. His touch was cool, recalling the hair-raising feeling of a snake’s constricting coils.

He leaned down, narrowing his eyes. “Yue Chenqing, did you know that if it weren’t for me, you would have died at my mother’s hand long ago?”

Yue Chenqing shuddered. Jiang Yexue’s brown eyes were too close to his face, seeming to flicker with scattered light and shadow from years past.

Not long after Murong Huang’s passing, Jiang Yexue fetched the little wooden toys Murong Chuyi had made for Yue Chenqing and went to play with the child. He knew the attitudes of many in the residence had changed toward him precisely by dint of Yue Chenqing’s birth, yet he felt neither enmity nor malice toward that infant bundled in his swaddling clothes.

Murong Chuyi, for his part, felt pity and compassion for the boy, but in order to keep up appearances, he never took the initiative to see him. He merely handed over his meticulously polished toys and sent them with Jiang Yexue. As time went on, Yue Chenqing's cradle filled up with little wooden people, horses, fish, pointy-eared rabbits… Murong Chuyi's trinkets were scattered everywhere.

Jiang Yexue looked at the wooden squirrel in his hand, sighing in amusement and exasperation. He really should make Murong Chuyi come take a look for himself, he thought. Little Chenqing would be left without room to sleep if his uncle kept giving him presents like this. He mulled this over during the length of his walk there.

Yet when he reached Yue Chenqing's room and pushed the door open, he heard a *clunk* and saw Yue Chenqing's wet nurse startle like a bird at the twang of a bow. She whipped around, knocking over a bowl of medicine that shattered on the ground. The liquid made ominous hissing noises as it splashed across the stone. "Y-Yexue-gongzi!" she stammered.

It took him but a moment to realize that within the bowl had been a fatal poison. Shocked and enraged, he grabbed the terrified wet nurse. "What's going on? What are you *doing*?"

The wet nurse was a coward; kowtowing and kneeling on the ground, she confessed that Madam Xie had pressured her to find an opportunity to feed Yue Chenqing poison. If she didn't do it, Madam Xie had threatened, her entire family would die.

Her account chilled Jiang Yexue to the bone. He refused to believe that his own mother would stoop to such cruelty for the sake of her own power. Dragging the wet nurse behind him, he went straight to Madam Xie —only for her to curse him out hysterically.

"What right do you have to criticize me? I'm clearing away obstacles for your future, you useless thing! You're always going on about *righteousness* and *benevolence*… But this world operates by the strong preying on the weak! You're just too naive to see it, Yue Yexue! How do you think I managed to make it this far? If you've never struggled down in the mud, you have no idea what it feels like to serve someone like a slave! Wait and see—in twenty years… No, it won't take twenty years—in ten years, you'll understand that all the cruel things I did were for *you*! This is

Yue Manor, not some happy little family! His existence means your demise! Do you understand?! Yue Yexue, how did I give birth to such a spineless disgrace!”

Jiang Yexue was heartbroken and furious. “Mom, that’s still murder! How did you turn into this—”

“That you can even ask such a question shows you have no idea how a noble clan works. Yue Yexue, you’ll end up just like me! Wait and see! If you let that brat live, everything that should have come to you will go to him. By then…” The woman’s shrill laughter from that night so many years ago seemed to echo, hair-raising, like long nails scraping the bottom of a pot. “You’ll rue the day you stopped your mother… You’ll regret it your whole life!”

You’ll regret it your whole life…

After this incident, this woman with eyes shot through with scarlet grew more unhinged by the day. In the end, she offended Yue Juntian himself, calling him a callous and heartless man in front of an audience.

The consequences were exactly as expected. Yue Juntian had favored Madam Xie in the past because she was obsequious, gentle, and knew when to bend. She showed the kind of subservience a noblewoman never would. Now that her softness had hardened to jealousy, there was nothing left for him to covet. Madam Xie fell from grace overnight. When her attendants saw that she’d repulsed Yue Juntian and would never return to favor, they scattered and left. Even her healer stopped treating her in earnest.

Jiang Yexue saw all of this. As her son, he couldn’t simply stand by and watch. He went to her bedside, intending to look for healers outside the residence to treat her. But the instant Madam Xie saw him, she began to scream, clawing at him and gnashing her teeth; she nearly stabbed his throat with a pair of scissors. She could no longer recognize her own son, nor heed his words.

Madam Xie hung herself soon after. When the servants found her dangling from the rafter, she was dressed in her most exquisite finery. Her dark hair was spangled with her best jewels, her wrists and neck laden with glittering bracelets, necklaces, beaded chains, and gemstones. She had even donned the colorful pheasant robes only the lord’s first wife was permitted to wear—stolen from what Murong Huang had left behind. Her suicide note

was filled with absurd ravings, proclaiming that *she* was the mistress of this family, possessed of the highest rank and power…

This woman's overweening ambitions painted a tragic yet utterly ridiculous picture. Whatever last vestiges of sympathy Yue Juntian had for her were destroyed by that note. In the end, she had been right about one thing: Yue Juntian was a heartless and fickle man. Her funeral was hastily and carelessly arranged, and the lord of the manor didn't deign to appear. The lavish costume she died in was swapped for white silk mourning robes, and her dreams of extravagance became a cold and shameful gravestone.

In her suicide note, Madam Xie had written fanatically about her son, "the heir to Yue Manor, Yue Yexue," proclaiming he would "certainly replace Yue Juntian as head of the family." Yue Juntian knew these were the ramblings of a madwoman, yet he became irked by Jiang Yexue's existence, and his attitude influenced the rest of the Yue Clan. In the blink of an eye, what was previously a faint aloofness turned into outright scorn.

"That lunatic's son."

"What ambition those two had, ha ha ha."

Jiang Yexue was in no mood to confront them as he mourned his mother. He'd always been graceful in bearing and well-read in the classics, and was thus a gentleman unwilling to meet his detractors at their level. He never complained about what he endured, nor did he speak up when others said he and Madam Xie were cast from the same mold. What could he possibly say? Could he tell them he'd stopped his mother from poisoning his infant brother? No matter how vicious and cruel she'd been, she'd loved Jiang Yexue in her way. Now that she was dead, how could he bear to heap another crime upon the lid of her coffin? He let it be, and swallowed all of the suffering in silence.

But Madam Xie's curse was like a white banner fluttering unceasingly before his eyes. *Sooner or later, everything that should have come to you will go to him… You'll regret it… You'll end up just like me. You have no idea how a noble clan works.*

Many times, he startled awake in the dead of night, brow damp with sweat. When he looked outside in panic, he'd always see Murong Chuyi intent on his work, adjusting wooden mechanisms beneath the light of the lamp. Jiang Yexue would lie back down, panting. Thankfully, Murong

Chuyi at least still believed him; he didn’t think Jiang Yexue coveted power and hated Yue Chenqing in secret. He could still stay in Murong Chuyi’s courtyard, and when he woke, he could still see the one he loved beside him.

Because of this, Jiang Yexue didn’t harbor much resentment toward Yue Chenqing. After the boy learned to speak, when he reached out and babbled *Gege, Gege* as he drooled, Jiang Yexue realized he found this tiny child truly adorable. This little brother was worthy of protection and care—he didn’t want Yue Chenqing to experience the same suffering he had.

By and by, Yue Chenqing grew up. When it came time for him to enter the academy, Yue Juntian gave him everything—he was the son of Murong Huang, after all, and hence of royal blood. Seeing it as a chance to ingratiate himself with the emperor, Yue Juntian ensured Yue Chenqing was handed every possible opportunity in life, and even made excuses to take back some artificing tools he’d previously given Jiang Yexue.

“Your little brother lost his mother young. His situation is so pitiable. As the elder brother, you need to provide for him.”

“Your little brother needs these more than you do. You’re an understanding person; don’t quarrel with him.”

“You’ve read lots of famous scholarly works. You should know what it is to concede courteously.”

Several of the manor’s more shameless servants mocked him, despite having no status of their own. “Yexue-gongzi, a gentleman ought to know when to yield.”

In irritation, Song-shifu wanted to rebuke them, but Jiang Yexue stopped him, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter. We shouldn’t sink to their level.”

But as one thing after another was ripped from his hands, a gnawing hole opened in his heart. That hole yawned bigger and bigger, filled with a swirling mélange of disappointment, fear, and resentment.

One day, Yue Juntian again came to call on him. “Yexue, you’ve studied with Chuyi so long. You’ve surely learned all there is to learn. From now on, it’s best to have Chenqing stay with Chuyi instead.”

Jiang Yexue blinked. “What?”

“What I mean is, when a child is young, it’s of utmost importance that he has a good teacher. You’re a sensible boy. Spend today packing up to let your little brother move in. He, too, likes clinging to Chuyi. Ah, it’s easy to see the two of you are brothers. You’re so alike.”

Comprehension sank in through the shock, but Jiang Yexue didn’t move.

Yue Juntian was mildly surprised. He’d grown used to Jiang Yexue’s unfailing acquiescence. His lack of reaction gave him pause. “What’s going on?”

“Father,” Jiang Yexue said tightly, narrowing his eyes. “Have I not been sensible enough?”

Met with Yue Juntian’s stunned silence, he pressed on. “What more do I have left? Why don’t you just kick me out of the house and be done with it—wouldn’t that be better? Chenqing would have more space to play.”

Yue Juntian had never seen him talk back like this. Enraged, he slapped the table. “Impudent!”

“It’s not that I’m impudent, it’s that you’re crossing a line! What exactly do you take me for?”

“Yue Yexue! How dare you speak to me this way!”

Jiang Yexue got into a huge fight with Yue Juntian that day. Jiang Yexue was good-tempered and mannerly, but he wasn’t a coward. Now that he was truly angry, he didn’t back down, leaving Yue Juntian humiliated and breathless with fury. “You little beast!” he swore, jabbing a finger in Jiang Yexue’s face. “Your mother said you would take my place, and now I see your greed! Despicable! You wish me ill—you wish your brother ill! You’re just like your mother!”

In the end, the entire manor got word of how father and son, who had long nursed dissatisfaction with one another, went from arguing to trading blows. But Jiang Yexue was young and had no one to lend him support; Yue Juntian quickly subdued him. The flogger lashed down in a vicious torrent of strikes, scarlet blood flying everywhere.

When he heard the news, the young Yue Chenqing dashed over. What he saw terrified him, and he pleaded on Jiang Yexue's behalf. "Papa, don't hit him anymore, don't hit Gege…"

"What do you know? He's the same as his mother!" His whip cracked toward Jiang Yexue's stubbornly upturned face.

"Stop it."

A beam of light flashed past, and a talisman overflowing with spiritual energy snapped into a barrier in front of Jiang Yexue. Yue Juntian was caught off guard; his arm twinged with pain and the whip fell from his numb fingers. He whirled in furious astonishment to find Murong Chuyi stepping through the door, his horsetail whisk in the crook of his elbow and a sigil at his fingertips, glaring cold daggers at him. "Yue Juntian, haven't you done enough?"

"You?" Yue Juntian's lips were trembling, "You—you're actually siding with this beast…"

Murong Chuyi helped Jiang Yexue to his feet, then turned and said in a tone low with warning, "He is my nephew. If you touch so much as another hair on his head, I won't let you off easy."

Thanks to Murong Chuyi's intervention, the fight hadn't escalated further.

In the stillness of the night, two people sat on the steps beneath the eaves of the courtyard. Murong Chuyi helped Jiang Yexue bandage the cuts on his hands. The wounds there were deeper than the lashes from the whip; they were from Yue Juntian's holy weapon. What kind of father used a holy weapon on his own son in an argument?

Murong Chuyi worked in silence, then asked a rare question. "Does it still hurt?"

Jiang Yexue didn't answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and dull. "Before my mother died, she said in less than twenty years, everything I had would become Chenqing's." He paused. "But if I told you I'd never thought of fighting Chenqing for the Yue Clan, would you believe it?"

“I would.”

Jiang Yexue didn’t think he would answer so quickly, without the slightest hesitation. He hadn’t wanted to cry, but upon hearing Murong Chuyi speak with such unwavering certainty, his sorrow and indignance overwhelmed him. He curled in on himself, forehead pressed to his knees, and sobbed in breathless silence.

He said, *I never wanted to fight for anything. I truly never wanted to be the master of Yue Manor, I don’t have that kind of ambition. I’ve already given up everything I can. Why did he have to take the only thing I have left, the only thing I won’t give up?*

Murong Chuyi sat with him. After a time, he sighed softly and patted Jiang Yexue on the shoulder.

But Jiang Yexue’s head was a mess; the feelings he’d suppressed for so many years had finally found a ready outlet. He had honestly lost control. When he looked up to see Murong Chuyi comforting him, that hidden desire surged out like an uncontrollable tide—even Jiang Yexue couldn’t have said what he was thinking, or perhaps in that moment, he wasn’t thinking at all. By the time he returned to his senses, he had already pressed close to Murong Chuyi and leaned down to kiss him on the mouth.

It was such a light touch, like a dragonfly skimming water. But he felt as if fireworks were going off in his head. Both of their minds seemed to have suddenly gone blank.

Eventually, Murong Chuyi roused himself, surfacing out of his shock. He shoved Jiang Yexue away as if he’d been stung by a scorpion and jumped to his feet, his beautiful face drained of color. “What are you doing?!”

At the expression on Murong Chuyi’s face, Jiang Yexue’s spinning head cleared in a flash. He panicked, his face heating as he stammered, “Chuyi, I…”

Before Jiang Yexue could stand up and explain, Murong Chuyi skittered backward, staring at him in outrage and disbelief.

“Xiaojiu, I’m sorry, I was just… I…”

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Being called *Xiaojiu* seemed to deal Murong Chuyi an even deeper wound. The world wobbled before his eyes. He pursed his lips a few times, wanting to speak but overwhelmed by the absurdity of his situation. He had grown used to treating Jiang Yexue as a junior; he could never have imagined Jiang Yexue felt this way about him. A shiver ran down his spine as icy sweat drenched his back.

But he'd just been kissed against his will; no matter how he rebuked Jiang Yexue, it was a pathetic position to be in. Murong Chuyi's face went white and green in turn. Before Jiang Yexue could speak again, he turned with a sweep of his sleeves and fled.

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Chapter 173:
A Gentleman No Longer

AFTERWARD, Murong Chuyi distanced himself from Jiang Yexue.

Jiang Yexue tried to apologize and explain himself again and again, but Murong Chuyi, having received too great a shock, avoided him and refused to be alone with him.

It was little wonder. Murong Chuyi had never had the slightest indecent thought about him, and though they weren't related by blood, he had only ever seen Jiang Yexue as his nephew. Any uncle would be scared off by this.

After a few failed attempts to reconnect, Jiang Yexue understood that Murong Chuyi was no longer willing to see him. He lived by the principles of virtue; even if he couldn't control what he felt, he understood that it was impossible for there to be anything between him and Murong Chuyi. That act of his had been thoughtless, born entirely of his turmoil—the first time he'd ever lost control in all those years with Murong Chuyi. He wanted Murong Chuyi to know he had never dared to hope for more, but Murong Chuyi gave him no chance to make amends.

After his relationship with his young uncle soured, Jiang Yexue was left wholly alone in the Yue Clan. No matter how virtuous he was, Jiang Yexue was still but a youth. Under those conditions, pain, dissatisfaction, grief, and bewilderment inevitably began to proliferate in his heart.

But he had always known to restrain himself, and he did his best to dispel his own unhappiness—until late autumn of that year, when a group from Yue Manor traveled to the northern frontier to refine armor on the emperor's orders.

Yue Chenqing was still young and only wanted to play. Despite a strict warning from his father not to stray out of sight, he often snuck away to explore the wilderness. He didn't care that the northern frontier was the border between Chonghua and the Liao Kingdom, a place with many hidden dangers.

On one such day, Yue Chenqing didn’t return to their camp. Yue Juntian was frantic with fear that the Liao Kingdom had captured his son, and ordered their whole party to search for him, Jiang Yexue and Murong Chuyi included.

“Do you remember what happened back then?” Jiang Yexue asked. The glow of the pool in Huntian Cave cast its bloody light over both his and Yue Chenqing’s face. “You were so headstrong and willful back then because everyone coddled you. Blissfully ignorant, childishly conceited, doing whatever you wanted whenever you wanted. We checked all the most dangerous places on the northern frontier, but we couldn’t find a trace of you.”

He tilted Yue Chenqing’s chin up and continued darkly, “In the end, I used one of my own devices to figure out where you’d ended up.”

Yue Chenqing looked dazed. His gaze was vacant; it was unclear how many of Jiang Yexue’s words he had heard. But Jiang Yexue didn’t seem to care whether Yue Chenqing was listening. These secrets had been trapped in his heart all these years, and now that he was finally giving them voice, he likely wouldn’t have cared if Yue Chenqing were deaf or blind or dead.

“I tracked you down, only to discover you’d made it past Chonghua’s border barrier and into Liao Kingdom territory. You were in dire straits when I found you—much like you are right now. The King of Liao had been conducting transmogrification experiments at the border; there were large numbers of beasts infected with demonic qi roaming the wilderness. You recklessly charged into their midst, got injured by one of those beasts, and fell unconscious in the grass.”

Jiang Yexue snorted. “I was the first on the scene; everyone else was still searching. It was like we were the only two people left in the world; if I’d made a move then, you would’ve died. Everything you’d taken would’ve come back to me—those tools and trinkets, Murong Chuyi, even the Yue Clan itself. Everything could have been mine.”

He raised a hand, stroking Yue Chenqing’s throat. He pressed close. The question he asked was addressed to Yue Chenqing, but he said it as though he were asking himself. “Yue Chenqing,” Jiang Yexue whispered. “Why was I so stupid? Why didn’t I kill you?”

Huntian Cave was still and silent; the only sound was Jiang Yexue's voice. Everyone else was powerless before him: whether it was Mo Xi paralyzed by the poison, Murong Chuyi rendered unconscious by his injuries, or little Lan-er, made into a puppet long ago—each a testimony to this man's victory against great odds.

Jiang Yexue's face twisted. When he stared into Yue Chenqing's eyes, the man in the reflection was a far cry from that perfect gentleman he'd once been. It didn't matter—he had long since given up on the person he used to be.

"That silly gege of yours," he murmured. "Truly, he was so stupid. You'd already ruined his life, but he remembered that you were Murong Chuyi's nephew and his own brother by blood. He didn't just fail to kill you—he rushed to *save* you. He saw that you were in grave danger, and as soon as he sent the signal flare, he purified the demonic qi in you without a thought for whether he might be infected himself. He passed you spiritual energy, keeping you alive."

Jiang Yexue looked up with a soft chuckle. "How ridiculous he was… How ridiculous I used to be. I kept you alive until Yue Juntian made it to the scene, but the demonic qi infected me instead. Ah, but when that dear papa of ours saw you in such a state, all he cared about was bringing you back so your injuries could be treated. He didn't even notice me."

"Although…" He closed his eyes, his tone unreadable. "That was for the better. To stop you from succumbing to the demonic qi, I brought it all into my own body. It was a risky choice. If the demonic qi couldn't be fully dispelled, according to the laws of Chonghua, the infected person would be executed. It's really quite fortunate that when Yue Juntian found us, he only had eyes for you, while I was next to nothing." Jiang Yexue barked out a derisive laugh. "In his eyes, I'd always been the expendable son of a commoner. If I threatened his reputation or sullied his name, he would offer me up to the gallows without the slightest hesitation.

"My mother was absolutely correct. Yue Juntian *was* callous and heartless; he could do or give up anything to ensure his own safety. Why would he hesitate? I couldn't tell anyone I'd been infected with demonic poison. After I returned to camp with the rest, I snuck back to my own

quarters while everyone else fussed over you. Oh, Yue Chenqing.” He sighed. “You can’t imagine the pain I suffered that night.”

His tone was nonchalant, but his eyes were so dark as to be depthless. “Burned alive, an agony worse than death…all these descriptions would be an understatement. Oh, but—” Jiang Yexue paused then, smiling slightly. “My apologies. I forgot you’re the young heir of the Yue Clan. You’ve been sheltered since you were little and never known the meaning of suffering. How could you have any understanding of the things I’m telling you?

“Later, I tried many methods to draw the poison out, but none worked. Chonghua had never seen this type of demonic poison before; I couldn’t control it at all, and it spread unchecked within me. I felt trapped, I struggled—I felt my hatred and bitterness growing so vivid I barely recognized it myself. I fought it for a very long time.”

That bloody nightmare was a thing of the past. Jiang Yexue’s struggle between humanity and demonhood had by his own admission been terribly painful, but now, it was tossed out in a few words as an offhand comment. Jiang Yexue paused. “Until one day, I felt that there was no more need for it.”

He looked down again. “Yue Chenqing, I became like this because I chose to save you. Who could I go to when I was in unbearable pain? Since I was a child, I yielded, I forgave, I conceded—only to end up this way. I’d had enough; I finally realized—so what if we’re brothers? I hated you! I didn’t want to be that idiot anymore!”

Mo Xi was paralyzed from head to toe, but he could hear everything Jiang Yexue said. He closed his eyes; he could almost see Jiang Yexue as a gentle and respectful youth, warm and good to everyone and everything.

That image shattered. Huntian Cave echoed with Jiang Yexue’s sinister mockery.

“My mother was right, you did take everything I had. If it weren’t for you, all of it would’ve been mine! Why did I yield to you? Even your life… Yue Chenqing, the only reason you’re alive today is because I showed you mercy twice over! As for your fourth uncle…”

At the mention of Murong Chuyi, the malice in Jiang Yexue’s eyes was veiled by a sheen of desire. “He ignored you, kept you at arm’s length,

berated you, refused to see you—did you think it was because he disliked you?" Jiang Yexue laughed harshly. "What a *joke*! I'll tell you now: that's not true at all. You are the person he loves most in Chonghua, because of your lofty, peerless mother… Because you're the son of Murong Huang! He would protect you even at the cost of his own life!"

Yue Chenqing flinched and looked up through teary eyes.

"The reason he shunned you…" He paused. "Is because of me, of course."

Eyes slitted, Jiang Yexue continued lazily. "After I decided to stop fighting, the demonic qi no longer caused me pain. Instead, it became something I could control. And that's when I discovered…there were many, many ways to make use of that demonic qi. The most compelling was to infect someone else with it. It would then keep them from getting close to anyone but me."

Yue Chenqing's tear-sodden lashes fluttered, a delirious fury surging in his chest. His expression was still slack, but shock and anger gave his empty eyes renewed focus. "You controlled him…" he muttered.

"No. I've never controlled him," Jiang Yexue replied lightly. "The demonic qi was impure; it wasn't powerful enough for that. But every month at the new moon, he would feel a burning agony. Only by drinking blood from my neck, or by taking the highest quality heartbalm, could he obtain relief. Unfortunately, he often decided he'd rather meditate alone through the new moon instead of coming to find me. Only when the heartbalm failed to relieve his pain would he be forced to seek me out in desperation."

He turned to glance at Mo Xi. "Xihe-jun is usually so sharp," he said with a smile. "You've probably already realized that when you came to the academy that night, this was why my room was in disarray, with blood all over my quilts. He came to me because the pain was more than he could bear. That night, he lost control of himself completely and tore the room apart. I fed him blood and heartbalm, then I drew him into my arms and lay down in my bed…"

"Jiang Yexue!" Yue Chenqing cut him off with a furious howl. "You dared to coerce him like this—I'll kill you! *I'll kill you!*"

Jiang Yexue bound Yue Chenqing in place with the mechanisms on the wheelchair. “What are you shouting about?” he remarked conversationally. “I would never coerce Chuyi. He was in awful pain, calling me all sorts of names. I could have disgraced him then, but I never did. That day, I only fed him my blood as usual, then lay with him in bed so his weakened body could recover. I certainly have no interest in rape. Instead of forcing him, I’d rather see him slowly lose his mind. I’d rather watch him dragged closer and closer to the brink every time the poison took effect. I’d rather him kneel before me of his own accord and beg me to take him. *That’s* what I want to see.”

Yue Chenqing was on the verge of another breakdown. Jiang Yexue took in his horrified expression, and his delight grew. “This wish of mine has been the same since before the demonic qi infected me. I only desired him to say he wants me of his own free will. I wouldn’t touch him if he didn’t say it. But of course, I had to keep him near me; no one else could be allowed to look or get close to him… To this end, I cast a black magic spell. If he grew too close to anyone, the poison in him would transfer to them. I forbade him from speaking of this—if he did, he’d lose his mind and be reduced to a beast of lust whose sole desire was to submit to me.” Jiang Yexue sneered. “So you see, if I couldn’t have him, at least there would be no other annoyances around him. I was willing to wait. Ten years, twenty years. I could let him resist forever, never bending to my will. But I would never let other people vie for his affection. Especially not you.”

“You… You’re insane!” Yue Chenqing cried.

“So?” Jiang Yexue replied calmly. “I grew sick long ago of being a gentleman, and there’s nothing wrong with being insane. There’s no need to be so dramatic—there are plenty of hair-raising truths in this world. For instance, did you know that His Imperial Majesty has known for ages that I’ve hurt people with demonic qi, and even whole-heartedly supported me in doing so?”

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Chapter 174:
Imperial Promises Are Most Unfathomable

***H** IS IMPERIAL MAJESTY?!*

Jiang Yexue had made this revelation without any particular emotion, but the words fell like a boulder into the sea, sending up thunderous waves.

“H-how could that be…?” Yue Chenqing sputtered, terrified.

Mo Xi wasn’t as naive as Yue Chenqing, but it was precisely because of this that a penetrating cold enveloped him. The emperor’s face was too often shadowed within the depths of his fur hood, pale as bone, mouth habitually curved in that faint, enigmatic smile. There was at times a semblance of kindliness within his eyes, but he seemed to be a man of thousands of masks. His earnestness looked so real—as did his heroics, his hatred, his devastation and sorrow. Mo Xi had seen many of his faces. The emperor’s emotions were painted as flawlessly as any actor’s stage makeup. Mo Xi had never known for sure which face represented the emperor’s true self, or which emotions were his real feelings. Although the revelation that the emperor supported Jiang Yexue’s use of demonic qi sent a shiver down Mo Xi’s spine, he found that he wasn’t the slightest bit surprised.

Chonghua’s emperor was a madman. This he’d known for a very long time.

Eyes on Yue Chenqing, Jiang Yexue continued. “Each day I watched as you grew up, watched as you began to cling incessantly to Chuyi. Even when he rebuffed you, you were undeterred. You were like a slug, I thought. A slimy little pest. Since you were little, anything you took a fancy to was something I would lose. I despised you more and more as time went on.” Jiang Yexue paused, his narrow eyes flashing. “Eventually, my patience ran out. I decided to cast a black magic spell on you.”

Yue Chenqing flinched in alarm.

“Don’t act so shocked. Honestly, I would have liked to kill you outright, but Chuyi would inevitably be upset if you died,” Jiang Yexue mused. “I cherished him, so I let you keep your stupid life. But I would

curse you—turn you into a mindless idiot and stop you from tagging along after Chuyi.

"And I was so close to succeeding. The spell made it into your heart. Another two hours and you would've been beyond saving." His expression darkened. "Unfortunately, that day…a guest stopped by the manor at precisely the wrong time. He happened to notice the strange state you were in, and like the busybody he was, he brought you to Shennong Terrace for treatment."

"Who…was it?" asked Yue Chenqing.

"Who else?" Jiang Yexue's lip curled in disgust. "Of course it was my dear friend, that faithful hero who still struggles to accept his fate even after being stained to the core by black magic qi—our very own General Gu."

Mo Xi's heart skipped a beat.

At this point, Jiang Yexue turned his attention to Mo Xi, who could neither move nor speak. "Truly, I loathed him so much," he hissed. "After that, the more he wished to keep someone safe, the more I yearned to hurt them. The more he cared for something, the more I wished to destroy it. Xihe-jun, did you think I didn't know what you would see after I repaired those jade scrolls? Did you think I fixed them because I wanted to help you?"

Jiang Yexue scoffed. "I merely wanted you to suffer, to push Gu Mang deeper into the mire of black magic! Who asked him to ruin my plans and destroy my success? He almost exposed my plot right under the late emperor's nose! Why shouldn't I hate him!"

Mo Xi stared, unable to say a word.

"It was *him!* He meddled and sent Yue Chenqing to Shennong Terrace. He let the healers discover the black magic energy inside Yue Chenqing, then reported this news to the throne." Jiang Yexue clicked his tongue. "It was a close call. If the late emperor found out I was cultivating black magic curses, my death would have been assured. Fortunately, the late emperor wasn't in the capital. He, Yue Juntian, and all the other nobles had gone to the Soul-Calling Abyss for the memorial ceremony, so the case landed in the hands of the crown prince at the time—that is to say, His Imperial Majesty."

Jiang Yexue paused. “I must say, our current emperor is a capable man. He quickly identified me and interrogated me with the Draught of Confession. Back then, I thought everything was over. Who could’ve known it was only the beginning?”

His eyes gleamed. “When the crown prince found I could refine demonic medicines, not only did he not expose me, he took me under his wing and made me a promise.”

“What promise?” Yue Chenqing asked.

“He wanted me to use my demonic qi to conduct the experiments he needed,” Jiang Yexue answered. “In exchange, he hid my affliction from the court and promised me that, in due time, he would help me seize my rightful position and install me as head of the Yue Clan.”

Met with Yue Chenqing’s stunned silence, Jiang Yexue continued, “For years, he and I studied black magic items and forbidden techniques.” Jiang Yexue swept his sleeves back. “I glimpsed many of the empire’s darkest secrets—I knew Gu Mang was a spy; I’ve known it for ages. I was the advisor behind nearly all of His Imperial Majesty’s unspeakable schemes.”

Jiang Yexue turned to Mo Xi with an insincere smile. “That’s right—here’s another interesting fact. Do you know, the Zhenlong chess piece in Lu Zhanxing wasn’t planted in him by the Liao Kingdom at all.” He grinned in satisfaction, as if savoring Mo Xi’s astonishment. “It was my chess piece, and His Imperial Majesty’s idea.”

After a few moments of stillness, Mo Xi felt violent dread and disgust surge in his chest. As he’d listened until now, he’d felt mostly a vast disappointment—but as these words sank in, all the color drained from his face. He felt as though he might vomit.

The sovereign’s grand speech atop the Golden Terrace. His grieving words within Zhuque Hall.

General Gu, you and your army are our most precious treasures.

Do you think framing loyal subjects is something that brings us ease?

Fireball, we don’t have a heart of stone. It’s only that sitting on high is like being held in a cage.

When have we been able to feel at ease?

In his memories, the emperor's mournful and dignified face distorted and changed, becoming an evil demon's mien.

Every word of it had been a lie.

"His Imperial Majesty had always planned to send someone to the Liao Kingdom to collect more black magic techniques," Jiang Yexue said mildly. "At the same time, he felt Gu Mang's influence should be excised as soon as possible. The poison in Lu Zhanxing, the defeat at Phoenix Cry Mountain, the pact on the Golden Terrace—His Imperial Majesty planned each step with care, precisely to strip Gu Mang of his wings, to turn him into a puppet dancing on the emperor's strings. In the end, he succeeded."

Jiang Yexue laughed coldly again, as if mocking Gu Mang for his naivete, yet at the same time ridiculing himself. "Who *isn't* a pawn on His Imperial Majesty's board? I'm no exception. I just saw through it, that's all. And that fiancée of mine, Qin Mujin… She'd been less than pleased at the prospect of marrying the son of a concubine without rank or status. After His Imperial Majesty took me under his wing, she gradually warmed to the idea. Later, after her family committed the major crime of counterfeiting money, she clung even more tightly to me, desperate and alone as she was."

His features were etched with disdain. "Of course I understood what was really going on. His Imperial Majesty didn't know of my feelings toward Murong Chuyi and thought I had some affection for Qin Mujin. He planted that woman to keep an eye on me. That much was clear to me, but I still wanted the emperor to help me take back the Yue Clan. It wouldn't do to offend him, so I played along. In spite of Yue Juntian's opposition, I persevered in marrying her."

The faint curve of his mouth was crooked with mockery. "This was the outcome His Imperial Majesty wanted. As long as my wife was someone he'd put in place, the Yue Clan would remain under his thumb after I became its master; this was his plan all along. Ah, but unfortunately…Qin Mujin disappointed him. She died in our first battle with the Liao Kingdom."

Everyone had said Jiang Yexue and his wife were deeply in love, yet it turned out to be nothing more than a facade. Their love was an act, their wedding a performance, and only her death brought him any joy.

“Our emperor is suspicious by nature; of course he thought she died in battle because I’d discovered his intentions and killed her off on purpose.” Jiang Yexue paused, his features ugly with contempt and madness. “It was truly hilarious. Could he really blame me for that woman’s uselessness? Even so, His Imperial Majesty lost faith in me. Shortly after, Gu Mang successfully infiltrated the Liao Kingdom’s inner circle, becoming his most promising lead for black magic techniques. He began gradually to push me out of his clique, dragging his feet when it came time to give me the power over the Yue Clan he’d promised.”

Jiang Yexue continued in a distant, forbidding tone. “After I injured my legs in battle and became disabled, he treated me coldly. When I asked him when he would make good on his promise, he’d impatiently brush me off, like he had more important things to worry about.”

He sneered. “It was lucky Yue Juntian taught me the meaning of ‘callous and unfeeling’ so well. When bargaining with a tiger for its pelt, one of course prepares for all contingencies. I knew he was liable to go back on his word after getting what he wanted, and that he might silence me when I was no longer useful. So one day, I told him I’d set up more than a hundred magical implements. If I died as a victim of one of his schemes, these implements would be triggered…” Jiang Yexue licked his lips, ravenous as any predator. “And reveal all of his dark and dirty secrets to the whole of Chonghua.”

Jiang Yexue chuckled, reveling in his triumph. “He panicked, then. He put on another show for me, trying to talk me out of it by promising the Yue Clan would be mine, I just needed to wait a little longer. He even went personally to the cultivation academy to organize better quarters for me.”

His smile faded, leaving darkness behind. “Too little, too late,” he sneered. “Why would I trust him again? The man on the throne was too scared to mess with me, and I wasn’t on his side any longer. But we had each other’s secrets in our grasp. Neither of us spoke of what we knew, but it was only to leave each other some measure of dignity. I understand what drives every one of his actions—including why he so badly wanted that wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul.”

Mo Xi felt another wave of disgust. The wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul…? His ears pounded dully. He was bitterly disappointed—Gu

Mang had risked his life to bring back that remnant soul, all to stop the Liao Kingdom from reawakening the beast. Could it be that the emperor wanted it for…

Jiang Yexue anticipated his question. “Of course His Imperial Majesty didn’t lie to you. If the Liao Kingdom obtained the final wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul, war would break out immediately, and Chonghua would be done for. He didn’t seize that remnant for peace across the Nine Provinces, though, but for his own eternal supremacy. His Imperial Majesty isn’t content with mediocrity, and he doesn’t fear battle. You two should’ve come up with some way to seal the soul yourselves instead of handing it over to him.”

His laugh was cutting. “I’m afraid the war Gu Mang hoped to prevent has in fact been expedited. You’ll see—soon, the Liao Kingdom will start a never-ending war with Chonghua over that wisp of soul. And our emperor…without a doubt, he’ll meet their attack with your blood and lives, and wage the war he’s been yearning for. He’ll achieve the glory he’s always sought.”

Jiang Yexue’s aura now was both crisply elegant and utterly terrifying. “Once he acquired his new lackey Gu Mang, there was no one to help me anymore, whether with healing my legs or seizing my position.”

Yue Chenqing’s face was stained with tears and blood. “Heal your legs?” he mumbled in confusion before realization set in. “So you took in little Lan-er not to care for her, but because you wanted her spiritual core…”

“Of course,” Jiang Yexue readily agreed. “Within her own body, her spiritual core only posed a risk to her. Now that I’ve taken it, her core provides me spiritual energy and powers the supports I’ve inlaid into my legs. What’s wrong with that?”

“You…turned her into a puppet, just so you could heal… You plotted this whole disaster in Huntian Cave, just to take the Yue Clan… You killed so many people…” In his rage, tears brimmed in Yue Chenqing’s bloodshot eyes. “Jiang Yexue! After this, who would ever acknowledge you?! Who could ever stand the sight of you?!”

Jiang Yexue chuckled. “Are you a pig? Once we leave this cave, who will know it was I who killed all these people? I merely used my demonic

energy to activate the seed I planted in Chuyi's heart. Even if they send a hundred coroners, the result of their investigations will be the same—all of them died at Murong Chuyi's hand."

Yue Chenqing cried out, hoarse with desperation, "You want to ruin his reputation as well?! You want him to take the blame for you?!"

"What reputation does he have to lose?" Jiang Yexue replied blithely. "And as for the blame…there's no need for that. It's easy enough to threaten His Imperial Majesty and have Chuyi secreted out of the prison. Murong Chuyi will disappear from the world. I'll lock him up in the depths of Yue Manor. He'll belong to me, but his life will be in no danger. Don't worry. Even if I kill all of Yue Manor, I'll still spare him."

A blade of brilliant light coalesced in Jiang Yexue's hand. He slowly raised the tip of the summoned sword to Yue Chenqing's throat.

"Yue Chenqing, I've given you twenty extra years on this earth—I've done my duty as your brother." Jiang Yexue smiled. "Don't blame me beneath the Nine Springs."

He swung, the blade of his sword whistling downward.

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Chapter 175:
If That Year Could've Been Eternal

IN THAT INSTANT, a blue-green blur flashed across Jiang Yexue's vision. He withdrew his blade and leapt back, his graceful brows drawn low in a rictus of fury. "A bamboo warrior?!"

Indeed, it was one of Murong Chuyi's bamboo warriors that had blocked his strike. The blue-green puppet wielded a scimitar and made wordless bellowing noises as it shielded Yue Chenqing.

Jiang Yexue whirled in surprise, expecting Murong Chuyi had awoken, only to find the man still lying insensate in a puddle of his own blood. Chill realization washed over him. It was Yue Chenqing—Yue Chenqing had been faking his terror.

When they'd fought the sword demon Li Qingqian so long ago, Yue Chenqing had summoned the protection of a bamboo warrior with a terrified shriek. Murong Chuyi was their master, but if he fell unconscious, they obeyed Yue Chenqing's orders in his stead. While listening to Jiang Yexue talk, Yue Chenqing had stealthily summoned all of the bamboo warriors wandering aimlessly through the cave.

Jiang Yexue swung his gaze back to Yue Chenqing. Despite his anguish, the vacant expression Yue Chenqing had previously worn was gone. Jiang Yexue ground his teeth. "Yue Chenqing… I underestimated you!"

Yue Chenqing coughed up a mouthful of blood, then looked up, panting. "I already told you. I'm the head of the Yue Clan now. How could I…" Bloody spittle stained his teeth scarlet. "How could I…allow you to commit such evil deeds…inside Huntian Cave!" He cried out, "All of you, strike!"

At his order, dozens of bamboo warriors swarmed out from the large boulder they'd gathered behind, charging toward Jiang Yexue like a great tide. Shrill howls burst from their wooden mouths as they struck to kill.

While these formidable automatons embroiled Jiang Yexue in battle, Yue Chenqing struggled free of the bindings on the wheelchair. Rising shakily to his feet, he stumbled over to Mo Xi. “Xihe-jun… I’m sorry…” he said. “We’ve dragged you into these Yue Clan matters.”

Mo Xi, paralyzed by demonic poison, could not respond.

Yue Chenqing’s black eyes were wet. He sagged with exhaustion, but his gaze glimmered with steely resolve. “But…I will not… I will *never*…let you and Fourth Uncle be wronged and wounded in vain…”

He turned and willed his wounded body toward the blood pool, step by painstaking step.

A shudder rippled through Mo Xi. Was Yue Chenqing planning to make blood sacrifice to the resentful spirits in exchange for Jiang Yexue’s life?!

Jiang Yexue had also guessed Yue Chenqing’s goal. He swore, the saber in his hand suddenly blazing with golden light. With one violent swing, half of the bamboo warriors surging toward him like a massive wave were blown to smithereens.

A golden chain swept outward, flying straight at Yue Chenqing’s legs. But though Yue Chenqing was weakened, he had fought with Mo Xi on the frontier for two years. He wasn’t as feeble and useless as his brother assumed. Enduring the pain of his wounds, he dove to the side, dodging the chain.

Yue Chenqing was breathless, his eyes blurred with tears, his hatred mixed with countless other emotions. “Jiang Yexue, I’ve never liked arguing or fighting, and I really hate competing over things… If you wanted me to return what I’d taken from you, why didn’t you just say so!”

“Oh, now you graciously want to step down?” Jiang Yexue scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Yue Chenqing, all the power in the world is taken by force—even the emperor’s throne.”

“But did you have to kill so many people just for this? Can you really live with yourself if you stand on a mountain of corpses to reach the top of the Yue Clan?”

“Why not?” Jiang Yexue burst into sinister laughter. “I’m done struggling with my conscience like a fool. Never mind the people in Huntian Cave today—even if my path were paved with the bodies of all the cultivators in the Nine Provinces, I wouldn’t feel the slightest twinge of discomfort.”

Yue Chenqing looked back at him through weary scarlet eyes, as though he could hardly bear to speak to him a moment longer. “You will not succeed,” he said weakly. “You’ll never get what you want, whether it’s the Yue Clan or Fourth Uncle.”

With that, he leapt toward the blood pool, ready to sacrifice his soul.

In that flickering instant, a golden chain snaked tightly around Yue Chenqing’s waist. Yue Chenqing jerked around—

Little Lan-er held the other end of the chain, looking at him with an expression of utmost apathy. When Jiang Yexue had missed his target seconds ago, he’d transferred the chain’s spiritual energy to his puppet Lan-er, who was standing behind Yue Chenqing. She had struck in the moment Yue Chenqing’s guard was down, immobilizing him.

Seizing his chance, Jiang Yexue threw off the bamboo warriors besieging him. This elegant, refined man strolled out of the cloud of bamboo shards and smoke, menace scrawled upon his features. He stepped up to Yue Chenqing and grabbed him by the neck.

“Yue Chenqing, you seem to be in a rush to die, and I’d like nothing more than to send you on your way.” As Jiang Yexue tightened his grip, Yue Chenqing flushed crimson, unable to get a word out. “But there’s no need for you to jump into the blood pool,” he continued. “Don’t even think of using your soul to bargain with the monsters in there and ruining my plans!”

The unruly spiritual core he’d seized from little Lan-er filled his body with a scintillating flame. “And please don’t call yourself the master of the Yue Clan—that’s all too laughable. The resentful spirits in Huntian Cave will never listen to you. You just damaged your own spiritual core like an idiot; you’re an invalid. You’ll never be able to become the head of the Yue Clan as you are. And the next in line…is me.”

He raised a hand and sent a beam of spiritual energy spearing toward Yue Chenqing's heart. Yue Chenqing vomited a mouthful of coppery blood. That hissing spiritual power had shattered his already fragile spiritual core to dust.

Jiang Yexue's eyes glinted like those of a vulture ready to dine on a fresh kill. He seemed bent on seeing Yue Chenqing as helpless and desperate as possible. After ruining his spiritual core, Jiang Yexue reached up and bellowed, "Hear and obey!"

His voice echoed through Huntian Cave, followed by innumerable screams. The resentful spirits and demons who had been directionless recognized their new master. They threw their heads back and opened their mouths, emitting earth-shaking howls. The blood pool roiled with crashing scarlet waves as the evil spirits that hadn't yet breached the water stirred and shrieked within.

Jiang Yexue laughed, his smile a malevolent twist. "Yue Chenqing, do you understand now who the real master of the Yue Clan is?" he asked, dripping scorn. "You'll never command them, because you aren't worthy!"

"If he's not worthy," said a cold voice. "Then what about me?"

Jiang Yexue jumped in surprise, his face still a mask of mad arrogance. He whipped around in recognition. "Chuyi?!"

At some point, Murong Chuyi had regained consciousness. Pressing a hand over his wounds, he struggled upright from that puddle of blood, a wretched sight. Although he had lost his usual bearing of an immortal in fluttering white, his unsettling air of calm hadn't lessened in the slightest. His face was bone-white from blood loss, but his expression somehow seemed more peaceful than usual. Murong Chuyi looked at Jiang Yexue coolly. "Yue Yexue, would I be worthy?"

Both were born of concubines: Jiang Yexue's mother was Madam Xie, and Murong Chuyi's mother was Miss Chu. Yue Chenqing was the trueborn son, birthed to the first wife Murong Huang. When Yue Chenqing lost the ability to control the resentful spirits of the blood pool, Murong Chuyi and Jiang Yexue had become equal.

Murong Chuyi ignited that same blinding spiritual flame, its light setting his sharp phoenix eyes ablaze. He shouted, voice steady, "Hear and

obey!”

Those resentful spirits surged restlessly again, and the demons that had just obeyed Jiang Yexue turned at the sound of Murong Chuyi’s new order, pressing toward Jiang Yexue and little Lan-er.

A look of shock came over Jiang Yexue’s face, but he held onto his composure. “Chuyi, you know you’re no match for me,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Murong Chuyi didn’t answer, funneling all his spiritual energy into those blood spirits.

“What are you playing at?” Jiang Yexue scoffed. “You’re no match for me in spiritual energy. I can take control of your mind again, you—”

“Rise!” Murong Chuyi commanded sharply.

The throng of resentful spirits threw themselves howling at Jiang Yexue, who swept back his sleeves and unleashed a torrent of his own spiritual energy to pull these evil spirits back under control.

He heard Murong Chuyi laugh grimly. “Yue Yexue, you’re correct. You steal spiritual energy and destroy spiritual cores; you feed people poison and control their minds. Indeed, I’m no match for you; I’m weaker by far.”

Jiang Yexue watched him uncertainly.

“I grew so very tired of being your puppet, but I endured it to protect Yue Chenqing. I persevered, no matter how loathsome I found it to be.” He hesitated. “To tell you the truth, I’ve had enough. I don’t care about the Yue Clan anymore.”

Hearing him capitulate, Jiang Yexue seemed to relax minutely. He took a step forward. “Chuyi, if you don’t interfere today, then, on your behalf, I could still…”

But Murong Chuyi merely regarded him stonily. “Jiang Yexue, there’s no need to negotiate with me. Don’t think you’ll ever control me again.”

Jiang Yexue froze in place.

Murong Chuyi's expression seemed to take on a hint of relief, like a sigh. "It's been more than twenty years," he said softly. "It's time for what's between us to come to an end."

Realization dawned upon Jiang Yexue. Rushing forward, he cried out in panic, "Chuyi—!"

But it was too late; there was only the sound of cloth rippling in the wind. Jiang Yexue clutched empty air as the corner of Murong Chuyi's pale sleeves slipped through his fingertips. Those bloodstained white robes fluttered down and away, plunging into the bubbling mass of the blood pool.

It was deathly silent. For a moment, none of them—not Yue Chenqing, Jiang Yexue, or even Mo Xi—felt what they'd seen was real.

Murong Chuyi had moved so decisively, as in everything he'd ever done. The instant he committed to something, he always acted without wasting breath on words. He would never draw out his farewells or explain anything to anyone. Or perhaps he knew Jiang Yexue could easily take control of his body again, so he wouldn't allow him any such chance. Murong Chuyi had always been merciless, even to himself.

For one moment, Mo Xi thought that he might see Murong Chuyi soar out of the pool on Zhaoxue, landing upon the shore like an immortal cast down to earth. As when he had attacked the sword demon Li Qingqian, looking thoroughly unconcerned yet completely confident in his victory.

But he didn't. The blood pool boiled, but only a massive scarlet wave swelled on its surface, coalescing into the distorted shapes of evil spirits screaming as they shot toward Jiang Yexue.

Yue Chenqing finally found his voice: "Fourth Uncle!" he screamed, voice breaking. *"Don't—!"*

As for Jiang Yexue, he stood rooted to the spot, his eyes wide, his face distorted with rage. He lifted a hand. He could've stopped the ghosts' attack in that moment, but the image of Murong Chuyi swallowed by the blood pool still danced before his eyes. Murong Chuyi's last words still seemed to echo in his ears, as if in a dream.

In his schemes, he'd prepared for everyone's death; he was willing to use anyone's life as a bargaining chip. But he'd never accounted for

Murong Chuyi's. He stood rooted to the spot without fully knowing why.

Before he could question himself, before he could name what he was feeling, the blood pool's ferocious wave crashed down upon him without mercy. All he saw was drenched in scarlet.

"Do you…" Jiang Yexue murmured senselessly, his voice quavering. "Do you really…hate me so much?"

No one answered. The crimson filling his vision was not unlike that old plum tree from many years ago, blooming a splendid red against the whitewashed wall…

Back then, he had been young and righteous, unsullied and innocent. He'd walked over, umbrella held aloft, toward that youth's back. Smiling, he'd asked gently, "Which family do you belong to? What brings you out here without an umbrella in such heavy snow?"

When Murong Chuyi turned, his eyes held neither hatred nor the disappointment and sorrow that came later. He only regarded him quietly.

But this recollection differed from their first meeting. Dazed, he saw Murong Chuyi smile back at him. Against the backdrop of falling snow and plum blossoms, that youth said to him: "Nice to meet you. My name is Murong Chuyi."

An ache pierced Jiang Yexue's heart, the pain of two decades stabbing through his chest. In the first half of his life, he'd lived strictly by the principles of morality. The world hadn't been fair to him, but Murong Chuyi, at least, had trusted and defended him. In the second half, he'd stained his hands with blood and come up with a thousand plots and schemes. Just as he stood to reclaim his power, he found the same man standing before him, blocking his way.

Murong Chuyi had once protected him. When everyone distanced themselves from him, when all his old friends avoided him, it was Murong Chuyi who gave him a place to stay; he gave him recognition, encouragement, and a home. Perhaps Murong Chuyi didn't truly hate him. Rather, the Jiang Yexue whom Murong Chuyi respected had died by his own hand the moment he had stumbled down that demonic path.

In his last moments, he heard Yue Chenqing's heartrending sobs and an agonized howl. *"Fourth Uncle—!"*

He's your *fourth uncle?* Jiang Yexue thought. *At the beginning of this story, he belonged to me alone… If only time had stopped for us in that year, on that day, beneath that old plum blossom tree. How nice that would have been.*

"Fourth Uncle… F-Fourth Uncle!"

The blood tide retreated, taking the broken bamboo warriors with it, along with the resentful spirits that had leapt out of the pool. The flood of evil spirits had devoured Jiang Yexue.

Little Lan-er lay crumpled on the ground, unconscious. Yue Chenqing had fallen to his knees, crawling pathetically toward the pool. His face was a wash of tears, and he was sobbing piteously. "Fourth Uncle… No… No, don't go…" he cried incoherently. "I'll never get angry with you again…" he wailed. "Please… I'm begging…"

As if answering his plea, a beam of gentle white light glowed to life within the abyssal pool.

Yue Chenqing's head snapped up, his pupils contracting to pinpricks. He trembled all over, his lips white and bloodless. He was so harrowed and yet so hopeful, trailing blood over the ground as he dragged himself to the edge of the pool. "Fourth Uncle…"

It was indeed Murong Chuyi, floating out of the blood pool. He had offered up his souls, and was running out of spiritual energy and time. His pristine white figure turned insubstantial as they watched.

Just as before, when Yue Chenqing had gotten into trouble and his uncle had swooped in to save him, Murong Chuyi's silk ribbons fluttered and his sleeves billowed. He was haloed by Zhaoxue's glow as he alighted like an immortal coming to earth.

Murong Chuyi had always come to his rescue with an air of great impatience. He never looked directly at Yue Chenqing, and hardly deigned to talk with him. But now, Murong Chuyi was freed of Jiang Yexue's black magic curse. He no longer had to worry that showing affection might infect someone with demonic qi. He could finally do what Yue Chenqing had always yearned he would: look down with a soft smile, raise a softly glowing hand, and gently place it atop Yue Chenqing's head.

Yue Chenqing wept in silence, his tears falling like rain.

“You’ve done very well, Yue Chenqing.” Murong Chuyi’s voice was light as smoke, echoing through the wreckage of Huntian Cave. “Unfortunately, your fourth uncle never properly spent time with you, taught you, or cared for you.”

“That’s not true… That’s not true! You treated me well—so well! I’m the one who let you down, it was me… Fourth Uncle, don’t go! Let me go instead, let me…”

“What are you talking about?” Murong Chuyi extended two fingers and gently touched them to Yue Chenqing’s forehead. “You’re young yet, with a long road ahead of you. This is the last time I can come to your rescue. In the future, you must be diligent and work hard. Remember, you’re not only Murong Huang’s son.” After a pause, he spoke in a gentle voice. “You’re also my nephew, Yue Chenqing.”

Murong Chuyi turned and approached Mo Xi. Placing his hand over Mo Xi’s heart, he sent the last bit of energy from his soul to dispel that stubborn demonic poison.

Mo Xi coughed out a mouthful of blood as his limbs regained feeling. “Murong…” he rasped.

Murong Chuyi shook his head. “You haven’t told Gu Mang I’m his gege yet, have you?” he asked softly.

Mo Xi couldn’t reply.

“Please don’t ever tell him,” Murong Chuyi said gently. “I’m sorry, Xihe-jun.”

He drew his hand away from Mo Xi’s chest. His figure had paled almost to nothingness, a quickly fading mirage.

“Everyone’s lives are ruled by fate. It seems Gu Mang and I were never fated to be. I won’t be able to honor our agreement for tomorrow. I ask you to tell him… Tell him to take care.”

That last glow gradually faded; only Murong Chuyi’s voice remained in the cave, soft with a gentleness no one had ever heard.

“Please don’t wait for me…”

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Chapter 176:
Murong Chuyi

GU MANG SAT BESIDE the window in the inn.

He'd been awake some time now. When he saw Mo Xi had left a barrier, he knew he must've gone out to take care of something. So he wasn't anxious at all. He sat obediently at the window and waited for Mo Xi to return.

After all the torment he had endured, his senses and emotions had become sluggish. It was rare now that he felt anything vividly; his joy, rage, sorrow, and delight had faded, as though rinsed with water. But as he watched the horizon pale like the white belly of a fish, he remembered that this dawn would mark the day his gege had promised to meet him, that he would soon have a brother and a family, and a smile stole across his face. Propping his elbows on the windowsill, he gazed with anticipation at the rosy clouds as the morning sun peered over the edge of the world.

After a moment of thoughtful hesitation, he stood and fetched the white robes Mo Xi had bought him. Given his clumsiness, he worried he might dirty these clean clothes and had been afraid to wear them, though he liked them very much. But today, he was going to see his big brother, so things were different.

When Mo Xi returned, the sky had not yet grown bright, caught on the very cusp of dawn. He pushed open the door and caught a glimpse of the man standing by the window—an upright and slender figure with a jade clasp in his hair, robes pristine as snow brushing the ground. His heart skipped a beat; in that dazzling instant, he wished everything that had transpired at Huntian Cave had been a dream, that the person leaning against the windowsill was Murong Chuyi, that Murong Chuyi had come as he said he would.

But it wasn't so. Slowly, his vision cleared; the man who looked back at him from across the room was Gu Mang in his new clothes, waiting quietly, docilely, eagerly for his brother to arrive.

“Mo Xi?” Upon seeing that Mo Xi had come back, Gu Mang was happy at first. But he became confused when he noticed the splotches of blood on Mo Xi’s clothes. “What happened to you?” He walked to Mo Xi.

Mo Xi didn’t reply; he couldn’t reply.

Only three people had walked out of Huntian Cave. Little Lan-er had been sent to a healer’s hall for emergency treatment, and both Mo Xi and Yue Chenqing could barely speak. Yue Chenqing had alternated between whimpers and sobs, then sat blankly by the blood pool. He was running through a hundred interactions he’d had with Murong Chuyi in the past, thinking about how he’d taken Jiang Yexue at his word and pushed his lonely fourth uncle deeper into a freezing abyss.

Murong Chuyi left no personal effects behind; the closest things were the dilapidated bamboo warriors scattered throughout Huntian Cave. All of them obeyed Yue Chenqing’s commands now; they had lost the master who carved them into being. But when Mo Xi accidentally touched one, it shrank to a size small enough to fit into his palm. It lay quietly on the ground, as if it had completed the last mission with which its master had entrusted it, and was now waiting for Mo Xi to bring it home.

Mo Xi produced that little bamboo warrior and pressed it into Gu Mang’s hand. Gu Mang blinked in astonishment. But he was not stupid, only slow to react. He had always been good at understanding people, even if the knowledge only brought him greater pain.

The room was terrifyingly silent. After a while, Gu Mang said quietly, “He won’t be coming, will he?” A pause. “Does he…not like me?”

Mo Xi reached out and drew Gu Mang into his arms. Shoving down his sorrow, he said, “No. He just has some personal business to take care of and had to leave. He likes you very much, which is why he had me bring this little bamboo figure to you. Once he sorts everything out, he’ll come back.”

“How long will it take?”

“It might take…a very long time…”

Gu Mang was silent. At length, he asked softly, “Mo Xi, why are you crying?”

Why *was* he crying?

The upheaval in Huntian Cave had happened over the course of one short day and night, but it had upended over a decade's worth of events. Jiang Yexue's warmth and tenderness were false, his love for Qin Mujin was false, Murong Chuyi's heartlessness was false, everything that the emperor had said to him was false.

It seemed Mo Xi had been living in a puzzle box of schemes. He treated everyone with sincerity, yet he was greeted in turn with mask after mask. He'd once thought everything he'd done for the nation was righteous, that grace and grievance were cleanly divided; but after this final upheaval, he understood once and for all that they'd all been no more than pawns on the chessboard.

How ruthless had the current emperor been, that he plotted for Jiang Yexue to lead Lu Zhanxing astray, to sacrifice the lives of seventy thousand soldiers, all to ensure that Gu Mang had no choice but to obey him? Gu Mang had lived for five years as a spy, enduring the weight of his bloody crimes entirely alone. For that remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul, he'd even lost his human mind and given up his opportunity to meet his elder brother.

They had sacrificed so much in hopes that the war would cease, that the Nine Provinces would be at peace. But in the end, which of their accomplishments hadn't merely served to sharpen the emperor's blades?

Mo Xi felt an endless, bone-deep exhaustion.

After the catastrophe in Huntian Cave, Mo Xi couldn't stay in Lin'an with Gu Mang to look for that reclusive grandmaster. News of the tragedy that had befallen the Yue Clan spread like wildfire, blazing across Chonghua. The entire nation was in shock.

Mo Xi and Gu Mang helped Yue Chenqing make the necessary arrangements and traveled with him as he brought the bier back to the capital. The funeral rites were an absurd pantomime. The imperial family had to preserve their image; they wouldn't carelessly reveal Yue Juntian's repulsive deeds. No walls in the world, however, were solid enough to stop

talk from spreading. Everyone soon knew the truth, and the mourning songs seemed profoundly ridiculous.

Through the swaying white banners, beyond the dense crowd of mourners, Mo Xi gazed up at the distant emperor solemnly pouring wine on the memorial platform. His fingernails sank deep into his palms. What did this person consider his subjects, his soldiers, his civilians to be?

The Yue Clan's funeral procession was a quick affair. Yue Chenqing had no heart for it, and more pressingly, the skirmishes between Chonghua and the Liao Kingdom had grown frequent. As the emperor was performing the memorial ceremony, members of the Bureau of Military Affairs were waiting to report to him about the situation on the frontier.

The scent of smoke was strong on the wind.

Jiang Yexue was right; the conflict between Chonghua and the Liao Kingdom hadn't ended because they'd seized the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul. Instead, it had only become more volatile. The funeral-goers fidgeted anxiously; even the handful of stubbornly optimistic nobles recognized that they stood on the cusp of all-out war between Chonghua and Liao.

"I heard the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom developed some new techniques he used in the battles on the frontier. It's an enchanted plague that can infect an entire city with demonic qi in a handful of days."

"Heavens above. What do we do now?"

"Ah, I don't know either—I heard Sishu Terrace and Shennong Terrace have been developing countermeasures, but I hope they can work faster. The Liao Kingdom has been sending wave after wave of troops to the border; I'm afraid a true battle will be next." The speaker's complexion was gray with fright. "If there's no way to defend against this demonic qi, what soldier would dare stand against them? It's the same as a death sentence."

"I'm not going to the front lines, no matter what…"

The crowd shuffled and whispered among themselves. With the Yue Clan's pain laid out before them, these old nobles were quietly discussing how to save their own skins in the coming war. In the end, people would always be more preoccupied with their own worries than the tragedies of others.

Yue Chenqing had no interest in remaining at the burial grounds to accept these insincere expressions of grief and instead returned to Yue Manor. After all the deaths, it was terrifyingly empty. He wandered through the corridors. Whenever his eye caught on something that reminded him of the past, his heart ached fiercely, and his shoulders crumpled inward, as though he was struggling to breathe. Each time, he had to sit down for a spell before he could continue walking. He was a young man, but overnight his joints seemed to have rusted over. Even striding through the halls of his home was now a jerky and laborious endeavor.

When he reached the doors of Murong Chuyi's artificing workshop, he stared at it without seeing for a long time. This was one of the most difficult places to enter in all of Chonghua, requiring both secret techniques and mysterious incantations. But Yue Chenqing seemed to have had an epiphany, or perhaps it was merely a wholehearted conviction. He raised a hand and pressed it against a door. The little wooden guardian popped out from its hidden compartment with a creak. "Who goes there?" it asked.

The voice was low and as melodic as the cracking of Kunlun jade. Murong Chuyi's voice.

The sound seemed to stab Yue Chenqing in the chest, the ache stopping up any possible answer. He knew nothing of any secret techniques or passwords; he slumped over, burying his face in his hands as he sobbed, "Fourth Uncle."

As his sobs turned into wails, that figurine watched him quietly. Yue Chenqing curled into a ball outside the workshop as he cried, "Fourth Uncle, I miss you…"

This was certainly not the correct incantation. Nevertheless, the tightly shut workshop doors emitted a muffled rumble, and the double doors opened outward with a groan. Yue Chenqing watched in near disbelief, then slowly picked himself up and walked inside.

The workshop was a mess. The master of this room was a busy man, and diagrams featuring every sort of mechanism and implement were pinned over the walls. Many were mere ideas that Murong Chuyi hadn't gotten the chance to realize.

Yue Chenqing looked through the drawings one by one. Murong Chuyi's reputation had been so poor that he was known as the Ignorance of

Chonghua’s three poisons. Yet the items Murong Chuyi had locked himself into his artificing workshop to create were all things that could benefit others. There were wooden mechanisms that could carry water, magical implements that could ward off evil…

More sketches were piled up on his desk. Murong Chuyi had lived under a curse that kept him at a distance from everyone; all the kindness he felt toward the world had been poured into these heaps and stacks of diagrams. He’d probably thought he’d live for a long time. Even if his solitude was hard to endure, at least he’d have many years to turn these ideas into reality.

Yue Chenqing rummaged through the items on the desk. There were wooden bearings, a few round nails, and some delicate bamboo warrior joints. Every time he picked up something, he looked at it carefully. When he thought about why Murong Chuyi had made these things, his heart ached fit to break. Greed, Wrath, Ignorance; Greed, Wrath, Ignorance; the most heartless artificer—outside the confines of this room, people spoke only of his infamy, while hidden within was his concern for the people.

The careful notes beneath each diagram made Yue Chenqing’s throat close up and his eyes mist over. At times, he had to spend a long time forcing down the pain in his heart before he could keep reading. He learned that this wooden mechanism was to help elderly people, and that tool was to protect children. He even found a stack of talismans mimicking the Yue Clan’s Talismans of Indestructibility.

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Gripping that stack of papers, he suddenly realized that when the sword demon Li Qingqian had wreaked havoc in Chonghua, and the poor commoners couldn't afford the Yue Clan's protective spells, the one who silently gave out talismans hadn't been Jiang Yexue at all. It'd been…

Yue Chenqing held those yellowed papers, feeling as if he'd been punched in the gut. He doubled over, dissolving into sobs of grief.

It'd been his fourth uncle.

He'd never been Greed, Wrath, or Ignorance; he was Virtue, Mind, and Wisdom. The gentlest, most tolerant person, who endured everything and kept his conscience clear even when forced to desperate straits… That was his fourth uncle, Murong Chuyi.

"Fourth Uncle… Fourth Uncle…"

Yue Chenqing sobbed as if shattered, shutting himself up in this little artificing room. The water clock dripped soundlessly away. The ink on the inkstone hadn't been washed clean, and a brush still lay askew next to the white paper, as if Murong Chuyi had rushed out just a moment ago to take care of something. The mechanisms and diagrams that filled this room—those unfeeling inanimate objects—couldn't know their owner was never coming back.

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Chapter 177:
Murong Lian Attends the Banquet

THE DAY AFTER the Yue Clan's funeral, a massive creature with wings dark as ink flew over the capital of Chonghua. To the frightened citizens below, it looked like a falcon covered in the white fur of a beast everywhere but its stormy feathered wings.

This mysterious chimera beat its enormous wings as it cut swiftly through the clouds; even the fastest sword riders couldn't catch it. After it flew a circle above the capital, it dissolved into a gust of dark wind and vanished. In its wake, a torrential rain fell over the capital for a full three days, blurring the lines between night and day, dawn and dusk.

When it cleared, many in the city suddenly fell ill. The healers from Shennong Terrace reached a terrifying conclusion: all those people had been infected with demonic qi. Chonghua had never cultivated the demonic path and had no practical experience in handling such dark diseases. Whatever of the qi Shennong Terrace managed to cleanse away, it was nowhere near enough. Too many people had taken ill, and many succumbed in agony before receiving any treatment. The victims who didn't die lost their minds.

Cultivators who'd encountered the Liao Kingdom guoshi's nine-eyed qin in battle conjectured the chimera was a demon released from one of the qin's nine eyes. Others said it must be a new demon beast the Liao Kingdom had refined, capable of whipping up poisonous storms and infecting everyone who touched the rainwater with demonic qi.

As these sorts of stories proliferated, fear gripped the nation of Chonghua. The emperor's face settled permanently in a worried frown. In an unfortunate coincidence, neither Jiang Fuli nor Mengze were in the capital. Jiang Fuli was still away on his travels, and Mengze had recently been indisposed and was once again recovering in a hot spring outside the capital. There were other healers in the city, but this unprecedented malady had appeared with such swiftness that none were able to find a cure, despite working themselves to the bone.

Gu Mang, too, had been affected by the downpour, but he fought to restrain himself and never lost control.

The tensions between Chonghua and the Liao Kingdom rose until they reached a breaking point. Finally, the army the Liao Kingdom had amassed at the border began to march. The route they took was treacherous, the shortest and least orthodox path toward the imperial city.

Faced with an approaching enemy army, the court buzzed with discussion. Some ministers argued they should rush to meet the Liao Kingdom and make the first move, while others asserted they should take the opportunity to strengthen the imperial city's defenses. There were even some who now lamented that the city had been built so close to the Liao Kingdom, and suggested abandoning it and moving the capital. These officials were as useless as bags of straw; that terrifying rain had soaked through their soft insides, filling the air with the reek of spoiled silage. They argued with great conviction:

"If that monster appears again and infects all our cultivators, how will the battle be fought? Discretion is the better part of valor; as long as we preserve our lives, there's hope for the future.

"What if that chimera is the new Demonblood Beast they've refined? If we engage it now, what chance is there of success? We must first develop an antidote for this evil poison before we can meet the Liao Kingdom head-on. Otherwise, we'll be spending the lives of our soldiers for nothing."

The whole assembly talked at the same time, none listening to their fellows, as if countless heads had sprouted from one monstrous body and all started barking at and biting each other. The racket gave the emperor a splitting headache. But indeed he had no method at his disposal to address the demonic qi. He could only write letter after letter to Jiang Fuli, urging him to return from his travels posthaste.

On the eighth day after the rainfall, Medicine Master Jiang finally received word and raced back to the capital. After three days in seclusion, he at last created an antidote.

A report of victory came from Yonglan Pass the same day. Chonghua's troops had beaten back the Liao Kingdom's vanguard, and the Liao army had temporarily retreated north of the Huang River. The court was much relieved. To celebrate the victory, distribute the antidote, and

discuss plans for meeting the next wave of attack, the emperor summoned all the lords of the city to a feast in the throne room of the palace, where they were to receive supplies of the medicine and consider the most pressing matters of war.

Mo Xi would have vastly preferred to skip this feast, being beyond disgusted with the emperor. Mindful of the nation's state of unrest, beset by internal and external threats, he hadn't yet sought out his sovereign for a reckoning. Furthermore, Gu Mang had been in very poor health. After the massacre in Huntian Cave, their plans to seek the Soul-Summoning grandmaster cultivator in Lin'an had been indefinitely delayed.

He worried over Gu Mang's condition and didn't feel safe entrusting him to anyone else's care, especially with Mengze away from the capital. Mo Xi had heard she'd fallen ill shortly after he and Gu Mang had departed themselves and had no choice but to recuperate in the hot springs. But as Jiang Fuli would appear at the banquet and bring medicine that could stave off the effects of demonic qi, Mo Xi eventually elected to attend and bring Gu Mang along.

The mask Gu Mang donned for the occasion was stifling; he pushed it up in the privacy of the carriage, exposing hazy blue eyes. Chin propped in one hand, he gazed out at the flickering lights beyond the bamboo curtain. His other hand fiddled with the little bamboo warrior Murong Chuyi had left behind for him.

Gu Mang had two possessions that were most precious to him: this bamboo warrior, and that brocade pouch of unknown origin. Mo Xi had been wary of this brocade pouch since the first time he saw it at Luomei Pavilion, but Gu Mang had never revealed where he'd gotten it, whether he had his memories or not. When Mo Xi had pressed him, Gu Mang only piteously said, "I can't remember. I just know it's very important."

Every time Mo Xi saw Gu Mang's chagrined expression, he found himself unable to say anything else. As time went on, he grew less willing to upset Gu Mang. He could only endure his own unease and avoid seeing that brocade pouch so he would stop pointlessly sulking.

Eventually, Gu Mang noticed his moodiness and showed Mo Xi what was inside the little pouch. It was nothing precious: just a single perfectly

white cowrie shell. Somebody had faintly inscribed the character for “fire” on its top, a peak like a leaping flame with a stroke on either side.

“Did a fire-type cultivator give it to you?”

Gu Mang shook his head. “I really don’t remember,” he mumbled, pouting as he slipped the cowrie shell back into the pouch, then tucked it into his clothes. “I just like it very much. I can’t lose it.”

As for who had given it to Gu Mang to make him so fond of it, to make him fiddle with it constantly like the bamboo warrior from Murong Chuyi, that remained a mystery to this day.

When Mo Xi arrived, most of the noble families were already milling about in the throne room, yet it seemed stubbornly cold and cheerless. Mo Xi had attended many banquets in Chonghua, but rarely had he beheld a sight as miserable as this one. There was no need to speak of Yue Manor, as Yue Chenqing hadn’t shown himself at all. Princess Mengze’s seat was vacant, and as for Wangshu Manor…

Mo Xi couldn’t describe what he felt as he looked at Murong Lian’s empty seat. After what he had learned in Lin’an, he’d realized Murong Lian, too, was Gu Mang’s elder brother, their blood relationship even closer than that of Gu Mang and Murong Chuyi’s. But Murong Lian was a different sort of creature from Murong Chuyi. He was like the ephemera he smoked, dispersing into mist on the wind. No one knew precisely what he was thinking. Murong Lian had tormented Gu Mang mercilessly since they were little, even going so far as to toss him into Luomei Pavilion to be abused when Gu Mang had first returned to the city. Sometimes, it seemed the more miserably he beat Gu Mang down, the lower Gu Mang’s circumstances were, the more comfortable Murong Lian felt. Yet he couldn’t accept it when Gu Mang was truly in danger, and would take any measure to save him.

Nobles were whispering all around them.

“Hey, have you heard? It sounds like Wangshu-jun’s close to kicking the bucket.”

“Really? Didn’t His Imperial Majesty send Shennong Terrace’s best cultivators to treat him? How is he still…”

“He’s been hanging by a thread the whole time. His Imperial Majesty’s done all he can.”

“Who’ll miss him apart from His Imperial Majesty? No one likes him.”

The red-lacquered feast table, its sturdy legs engraved with decorative clouds, was entirely empty of people. It suddenly occurred to Mo Xi that, after Madam Zhao’s death, Murong Lian had no one close to him. From the outside, he seemed to have many at his beck and call, but those who lingered around him were all either servants who depended on him or subordinates who feared him.

Still, Mo Xi couldn’t guess what Murong Lian thought of Gu Mang.

The emperor emerged from the back room with Jiang Fuli to mark the commencement of the feast. The medicine master’s days of travel seemed to have worn him into something more austere. Perhaps because of the nation’s grave predicament, he appeared less arrogant and capricious than usual as he stood quietly by the emperor. His green robes were long and loose, his wide sleeves trailing down. With his eyes lowered, he gave off a rare aura of steady reliability.

“We summoned all of you tonight, firstly to distribute our hard-won antidote, and secondly because we expect you to devise some plan for answering the enemy’s attack,” the emperor announced from his rounded gilt-redwood chair. “As for the recommendations to retreat and avoid battle…” The emperor looked up, his eyes flashing. “If anyone wishes to suggest it tonight, they may save their breath.”

The faction of old subjects who had been advocating for peace all shot silent, surreptitious looks at one other. Their discreet glances did not escape the emperor’s notice. “If you have something to say, let’s have it,” he sneered. “Your earlier reason for suggesting retreat was that the demonic plague was hard to dispel. We found it reasonable then, but now that Medicine Master Jiang has developed an antidote, you still want to turn tail and run. Are you so craven?”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” one old noble replied falteringly, “Liao first violated the armistice, then rashly used forbidden techniques attempting to steal back the final wisp of their Demonblood Beast’s soul. In fact, perhaps we should tamper with that fragment of Demonblood Beast’s soul and then

return it to them. They'd get what they wanted; they wouldn't need to threaten war. As for the Demonblood Beast, the Liao Kingdom would struggle to restore it so soon if we ruin it. The conflict could be delayed another eight or ten years—"

The emperor chuckled. "What use is eight or ten years?"

"Er, anything could happen in eight or ten years. Chonghua could somehow disrupt Liao's plans of reviving the Demonblood Beast, or study the spirit beast diagrams Preceptor Chen left behind and create our own beast to fight it. In short, this old subject believes Chonghua is currently in a position of weakness and unsuited to this foolhardy venture of war. I beg Your Imperial Majesty to reconsider."

The emperor laughed loudly. "Yushu-jun, we think those eight or ten years you covet are not about giving Chonghua time to prepare, but rather for Your Elderliness to enjoy your retirement, right? At your age, you'll be gone in a decade. After you pass, why would you care what calamity awaits this nation?"

He had jabbed Yushu-jun right in the heart. The old noble paled but still insisted, "Your Imperial Majesty, as the heavens bear witness, this old subject's every word is loyal—"

The emperor was still smiling, but his eyes held no hint of mirth. "Mn. Take him away."

"Your Imperial Majesty—!"

The smile disappeared. The man on the throne looked terribly cold, his entire body emanating an arctic iciness.

"We said, *take him away*."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!"

"Distribute the portion of Medicine Master Jiang's antidote meant for Yushu-jun's manor to the others," the emperor said indifferently. "If anyone else would like to suggest retreat, then indeed, you may shed your armor and go back to the fields. But we won't be giving you any medicine in that case; we will only safeguard the lives of those willing to fight for Chonghua and its civilians. Those like Yushu-jun who are content to hide in a corner

and farm the land…” His eyes glinted with a sinister chill, his teeth clicking lightly as he spoke: “Prepare to be left to your own devices.”

The medicine that could ensure one’s safety by dispelling demonic qi was quite literally in the emperor’s hands. Those blathering nobles all shut their mouths with a snap.

The emperor’s vulturelike eyes raked over the hall. He let out a laugh. “If you were always like this, falling in line so obediently, there’d be hope yet that Chonghua could conquer the Nine Provinces and bring peace to the world.”

Mo Xi felt a surge of loathing upon hearing this. The emperor always brought things back to the contentment of the people and the health and safety of the commoners. And while Mo Xi had long since known that the heart of the ruler was hardest to read—that it would be impossible for everything His Imperial Majesty said to be true—he’d never anticipated this level of falsehood. The emperor didn’t merely intend to understand black magic; he lusted after it. The techniques Gu Mang had endured such suffering to bring back were treasures the emperor had long been drooling over. All his talk of a world at peace was a lie. It was merely a slogan, a flag he waved to motivate heroes and loyal subjects. This man’s true intent was to conquer the Nine Provinces.

No one else suggested retreat. The emperor instructed Jiang Fuli to distribute the demon-dispelling medicine from its brocade box to each of the masters of the noble residences. Gu Mang sat next to Mo Xi as they waited, his blue eyes quietly tracking Jiang Fuli as he walked back and forth.

“Why do you keep looking at him?”

“What’s he giving out?” asked Gu Mang. “Looks like everyone wants it.”

“It’s medicine,” replied Mo Xi.

“Isn’t medicine bitter?” Gu Mang frowned. “Why are they all eager to eat it… Will we have some, too?”

Mo Xi patted him on the head. “I’ll get you something sweet.”

At Gu Mang’s happy nod, Mo Xi sighed inwardly and turned to glance after Jiang Fuli, distributing medicine at the other side of the hall. He planned to wait until the feast ended to catch Medicine Master Jiang alone. Perhaps he of all people could think of some way to address Gu Mang’s condition.

Jiang Fuli was speaking to Changfeng-jun. Little Lan-er had remained unconscious after Huntian Cave. Jiang Yexue had taken her core and turned her into a puppet; her tiny body had endured too much. Changfeng-jun was weighed down with regret and exhausted from worrying over his daughter’s health the past few days. He pulled on Jiang Fuli’s sleeve and spoke to him intently, but Jiang Fuli remained indifferent. His replies amounted to a small handful of words; finally, he yanked his sleeve back and turned away.

As Changfeng-jun pleaded, he’d accidentally dropped the small demon-dispelling pill he’d been given on the ground. Brokenhearted at being so coldly rebuffed, he cared nothing for his own life or death and paid no mind to where the pill had rolled. Jiang Fuli shot Changfeng-jun a glance but wasted no more breath on him. He collected the dropped medicine with his long fingers and set it back on the bamboo table before turning on his heel to visit the next table.

But Mo Xi, who had watched the entire exchange, vaguely felt that something was off. A chill was crawling up his spine. He stared at Jiang Fuli. He couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary, yet he had a feeling that whatever was amiss was right before his eyes—that it was a major, obvious thing. He simply couldn’t put his finger on it.

There was something about Jiang Fuli, something extremely wrong. What was it…?

As his brows knit in thought, he heard a chilly voice drifting into the throne room from beyond the doors. “Everyone, put down the medicine in your hands. Don’t take it.”

The astonished crowd of nobles turned in its direction.

Outside the door, a man in lavish sapphire robes slowly ascended the steps. His features were vulpine, his complexion pale and sickly. Although he looked horribly frail, he was back on his feet and his mind was clear.

“Aiya, Wangshu-jun?!” someone exclaimed in alarm.

And so it was. The man who sauntered slowly into the hall was none other than Murong Lian, rumored to be hanging onto life by a thread after a grave injury.

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Chapter 178:
Forced Abdication

THE HALL INSTANTLY fell still. Only the candles adorned with winding dragons flickered brilliantly, illuminating everyone's faces.

Murong Lian emerged slowly from the shadows into the hall, coming to a stop in the middle of that sea of watching eyes. He looked up, his sultry peach-blossom eyes gazing coldly at the man on the throne. "Your Imperial Majesty."

But the emperor wasn't looking at Murong Lian. Instead, he shot a dark look at the grand elder of Shennong Terrace before turning to meet Murong Lian's eyes. His expression was visibly wary, yet he managed to feign some marginal concern as he said with a smile, "Wangshu-jun is ill. We're surprised your illness permits you to appear."

"I'm doing much better, thanks to Your Imperial Majesty," Murong Lian replied lightly. Then he addressed the crowd. "Put down that medicine. It's not an antidote—it's poison."

Startled cries rose from the assembly. "What?!"

The emperor was silent a spell, his eyes dark. Then he jerked his chin slightly, indicating that the Shennong Terrace elder should see to Murong Lian. "Elder Chen, Wangshu-jun has been babbling nonsense for the past few days. As his attending physician, shouldn't you take proper care of him? Why haven't you taken him away to rest?"

"Ah…" Elder Chen stood stunned for a moment, then bustled over to Murong Lian. "Yes—Wangshu-jun, what you're experiencing is illness-induced psychosis. Come with this old subject to rest in a quiet room for a while."

He pulled at Murong Lian's sleeve, but Murong Lian only shot him a chilly glance. "Sweetheart, we both know what you've been putting in my medicine the past few days. I suggest you get lost before I lose my temper for real. I'll teach you the true meaning of pain."

Elder Chen was sweating all over. At Murong Lian's castigation, he shrank back like a turtle and looked fearfully at the emperor.

The emperor's face had turned faintly green, but he still forced a wan smile. "Murong Lian, we're afraid sickness has made you confused."

Murong Lian made no response. Of all the extended imperial family, Murong Lian most resembled the emperor. But at that moment, as he stood in the middle of the hall, those features that mirrored the emperor's contained no reverence whatsoever. He faced the throne with complete apathy.

The emperor shivered. That prophecy from long ago foretelling strife among siblings and disharmony between brothers shot through his mind. But Murong Lian was a distant relative, not a member of the immediate imperial family. How could that prophecy be about him? It couldn't possibly.

His grip tightened little by little on the redwood chair's armrest, tendons protruding. But still he gritted his teeth and smiled. "We're to blame—we didn't get you properly treated. We've let you take leave of your senses and run over to the throne room to make a scene."

"What can Your Imperial Majesty mean?" Murong Lian replied evenly. "Your Imperial Majesty has instructed Elder Chen to care attentively for me over the past few days. To avoid rousing suspicion, you didn't let me die at once, but neither did you let me return to health. Because I knew too much."

The emperor laughed out loud, his expression stormy. "You've smoked too much ephemera, drowning in debauchery and your own intoxicated illusions. We fear you can't differentiate between dreams and reality anymore."

Murong Lian had roused the crowd's shock and disbelief a moment ago, but as soon as the emperor mentioned ephemera, many relaxed. Everyone knew smoking too much ephemera led to hallucinations. For the past several years, Murong Lian's pipe had never left his hand; it was reasonable to imagine he'd passed the point of no return. The emperor had insinuated that Murong Lian was addled. Given how he looked right now, sapphire robes in disarray with a general air of dishevelment, he really did look like he'd gone mad.

But Mo Xi thought otherwise. He knew too well what Murong Lian looked like when he was serious. Though he never appeared particularly proper, his expression in those moments—as in this one—was ruthlessly cold, like a vulture wheeling under gray skies. And now that Mo Xi understood the emperor's motives, coupled with that vague sense of wrongness from Jiang Fuli… He knew Murong Lian wasn't insane. It was the emperor who wished to paint him as a madman. The words of a madman, naturally, weren't to be believed.

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Mo Xi turned to see Gu Mang, gazing blankly at Murong Lian. Something in his heart shifted. "What is it?" he asked.

Gu Mang couldn't answer. Lips pursed, he stared without focus. At last, he said, "He looks familiar… When I was locked up and everyone said I assassinated someone, was that him?"

Mo Xi patted his hand to comfort him. "You didn't do that."

Gu Mang fell silent again, his blue eyes pinned unblinkingly on Murong Lian. He blurted, "I have to yield to him."

"What?"

Gu Mang seemed as surprised as Mo Xi by his own reaction. "I remember that I need to yield to him, that I can't hate him." Then, with some frustration, "But I don't remember who he is."

As the crowd murmured, Murong Lian whipped his head around. His gaze shot past everyone else and fixed directly upon Gu Mang's face. In his current state, Gu Mang couldn't identify what expression Murong Lian wore—it seemed to contain irritation, competitiveness, recognition, relief… All these emotions flitted over his face before blending together.

Gu Mang's eyes flew wide as he looked at Murong Lian in mild bewilderment. His head pulsed with a dull ache. Murong Lian's bloodied face by the moonlit riverbank flashed before his eyes. He saw this man reach out to shove him away: *Run! Otherwise, you'll never be able to explain this…*

With a muffled groan, Gu Mang raised a hand to his own throbbing temple.

You filthy slave! You dare touch my dad's things? Take it off!

Once you put on this slave collar, you'll forever be Murong Lian's dog.

The piercing voice he had heard throughout his youth stabbed into his skull, filled with malice, suspicion, covered in thorns. But in the end, the sound morphed into a woman's gentle words:

A-Mang, you owe them your life. Your Auntie Lin can't explain many things, but…please don't resent that mother and son too much, okay?

And Murong Lian's hoarse urging when he'd been attacked—*Run.*…

Gu Mang lowered his head and grimaced, clenching his jaw, eyes glassy. Noting his strange behavior, Mo Xi asked, "Are you okay?"

"I…" Gu Mang mumbled. "I don't know." He looked up at Murong Lian once more, this time meeting his gaze. An evasiveness flitted across Murong Lian's features, but he turned to face Gu Mang, staring him down with no intent to concede. Gradually, his expression softened and grew calm.

"I trust him," Gu Mang murmured. "He's not insane."

They were too far away for Murong Lian to hear what Gu Mang said, but after the glance they exchanged, Murong Lian seemed to have committed to some idea in his mind.

Murong Lian looked back toward the emperor and raised his voice: "In the past, I merely wanted to ensure lasting prosperity for Wangshu Manor, and cared nothing for the lives of outsiders; I've been content to lurk in a corner. To avoid arousing His Imperial Majesty's suspicion, I was arrogant and impossible. In the more than thirty years of my life, nothing has been worthy of my satisfaction. But as it happens, I have a brother. One who never forgot what should be done even when I trampled him into the mud, one who persevered in his ambition to protect the lives of Chonghua's civilians even when smeared in the filth of accusations. While I worried he would covet my position and usurp my inheritance, he endured untold humiliation for the good of the nation, never scheming for his own benefit. I feel like I've been fucking outdone." Murong Lian lifted his peach-blossom eyes, every word deliberate. "And I'm pretty damn displeased about it."

He continued: “When have I been content with losing? I’ve fought Xihe-jun and Changle-jun, fought the heavens and earth and fate itself. Will *I* lose to a lowborn brat?” Murong Lian burst into laughter, but there was no mockery in it. He lifted his pipe and drew from it deeply. Exhaling a plume of pale smoke, he said calmly, “I refuse.”

The emperor narrowed his falcon-like eyes. “Murong Lian, that’s enough!”

“Murong Chen.”

When this name was spoken aloud, the entire hall burst into a terrified furor, while the emperor’s face turned pale as ice. No one had heard those three syllables in the throne room for a very long time—though of course, everyone knew that this was the emperor’s name. Addressing the emperor this way in court was a crime punishable by death.

“Murong Chen,” Murong Lian repeated slowly, enunciating with perfect clarity. “You’d better listen up,” he sneered. “Everyone’s always called me a spoiled brat, but today I’ve had a change of heart. For once, I insist on being a hero.”

“You’re the furthest thing from a hero!” the emperor roared.

Murong Lian sketched a mocking bow. “You flatter me. You, on the other hand, are the closest thing to shameless.”

The emperor bit back his overwhelming rage. “Murong Lian,” he spat, “do you seek death today?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Murong Lian laughed. “Haven’t you tried to kill me once already?” He turned to address the entire court of civil and military officials. “Gentlemen, take a good look—the pills you’re holding aren’t a demon-dispelling concoction at all, but rather medicine to control your minds!”

After a moment of shock, everyone began to exclaim in alarm.

“What did he say?!”

“Medicine to control our *minds*?”

The emperor wrinkled his nose. “Preposterous, complete and utter nonsense!” he said, expression predatory. “Jiang Fuli has unsurpassed skill in healing and is no one’s tool—everyone knows this. Murong Lian, if you

are wholeheartedly determined to slander us, at least come up with a less ridiculous story!” He turned. “Medicine Master Jiang, Wangshu-jun claims you are working with us to brainwash people. We’re quite curious—might there exist such a simple method of controlling others?”

“The two most effective methods,” Jiang Fuli replied readily, “are the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows and the Zhenlong Chess Formation. But they are far from simple. The first cannot be grown without a soul from the demon tribe, and coaxing the flower to bloom is extraordinarily challenging. The latter is one of the ancient three forbidden techniques.” He shot Murong Lian a cool and indifferent glance. “Wangshu-jun, you’ve rather overestimated this humble one.”

“Hear that?” the emperor interjected; there was an edge to his voice now. “Murong Lian, surely you’re not going to accuse us of employing one of these two heinous methods? Besides, neither the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows nor the Zhenlong Chess Formation involves medicating their victims.” Pausing, he ran his gaze over the crowd of officials. “But if anyone credits what Murong Lian has said and feels frightened, they are free to return the pills to Medicine Master Jiang and seek their own methods of fending off the demonic qi!”

Which of those cowardly old nobles would be willing to take such a gamble? After a moment of hesitation, someone said, “Murong Lian, have you gone insane? His Imperial Majesty already rules over everyone in our nation—why would he waste his energy controlling people by such methods? I think the one trying to control others’ minds is you!”

Murong Lian laughed mirthlessly. “Didn’t His Imperial Majesty say it himself before?” He repeated the emperor’s earlier words: “‘If you were all always like this, falling in line so obediently, there’d be hope yet that Chonghua could conquer the Nine Provinces and bring peace to the world.’”

“Um…” One by one, the officials fell silent. Some snuck glances at the emperor’s darkening expression.

Eyes narrowed dangerously, Murong Lian’s voice took on a deliberate note of pity. “Murong Chen, don’t worry, I know you too well. Let’s consider your journey to power—you were the object of constant criticism when you were the crown prince, and the late emperor even

thought to unseat you from the line of succession before he passed. You managed to ascend to the throne only with much difficulty, yet all your subjects had their own schemes and plans, be it the old conservatives or the grasping in-law officials. You look high and mighty, but you're a bird trapped in a cage, unable to fly free or fight back no matter how hard you beat your wings. How could you be satisfied? Even in your dreams you wish for a court of obedient subjects. It would be best if they had no personal opinions at all; if you said east, they'd go east; if you pointed west, they'd go west. You'd rather keep a basket of bamboo warriors instead of a crowd of chattering civil officials and generals. You said this yourself—I hope you haven't forgotten."

The emperor sat in silence under the eyes of his court. After a long moment, he began clapping expressionlessly. "Murong Lian, you're such a talented storyteller. We concede the crown of insanity to you."

Murong Lian flashed a joyless smile. "I don't dare accept it. It's only that, in order to stay alive within your shadow, I've spent all these years trying to guess at your thoughts so that I might cater to them. I've come to understand you better, I think, than most."

The emperor nodded, a mocking twist to his mouth. "Very well. Let's say what you're claiming is correct. Even if we truly intend to turn all of these ministers of our court into fools and puppets, which method would we be using? Would it be the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows or the Zhenlong Chess Formation? If we had mastery of either of these techniques, why expend so much effort distributing this demon-dispelling medicine to all of you? Wouldn't it be better to plant flowers or chess pieces directly in you instead?"

"Ah, but you don't know how," said Murong Lian. "You don't know how to use the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows, nor have you any grasp of the Zhenlong Chess Formation. For years, you ravenously accumulated black magic curses of the Liao Kingdom to create a method derived from these two techniques. Although the effect won't be as strong, the cost to the spellcaster won't be so high either.

"Of course," he continued, "how could anything in this world be that easy? Throughout all your experiments and refinements, you were missing something. You'd been trying for years, but you hadn't managed any

exceptional results. Only after Xihe-jun brought you the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul did you finally create a pill that could compel its victim to obey your commands. Before this development, you were never satisfied with the level of control you could achieve."

The emperor sat high on the throne, his hands folded before him and his chin slightly raised. "A fascinating story. But where is your proof?"

Murong Lian paused. He lifted the pipe in his hand, took a drag, and slowly exhaled it. "Murong Chen, do you think I didn't know Jiang Yexue used to be your advisor?"

"So what if he was?"

"Murong Chuyi was under the control of Jiang Yexue—only heartbalm could lessen the effects of his curse. I've been secretly cutting the ephemera I smoke with heartbalm as well."

He continued in an indifferent tone, "Murong Chen, three years ago, you slipped a mind-controlling medicinal powder into my wine. You thought your formula was ineffectual, but that's not entirely true. It wasn't perfect, but it did affect me. Since then, I've been relying on ephemera to maintain my lucidity." With a last exhale of curling smoke, he sneered, "Did you really think me ignorant of the despicable things you've done to me?"

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Chapter 179:
Mo Xi Endangered

MO XI SHIVERED. He remembered how he'd bumped into Murong Chuyi at the academy and smelled a familiar scent on him. He hadn't been able to figure out what it was at the time, but now that Murong Lian mentioned it, he suddenly realized that it was very reminiscent of ephemera.

"Murong Chen," Murong Lian said lightly, "you might not like to hear it…but these are the times you live in. You were born in this era. You ought to square your shoulders and face whatever trouble befalls the nation instead of scheming to make everyone obey you through underhanded methods. Yes, Chonghua has plenty of incompetent wastrels; they deserve their share of loathing and irritation. But if you can't identify those who are worthy, if you're only capable of silencing every voice that isn't your own and turning all your subjects into mindless puppets, that will mark the end of Chonghua."

Some of the nobles took a step back, shaking their heads in disbelief. "Y-Your Imperial Majesty? Is what he says true?"

"Is this really not demon-dispelling medicine? Is it a pill that can control our minds, like Wangshu-jun is saying?"

The emperor was silent, his expression dark and unreadable on his high perch atop the throne. After a moment, he said, "Even if you gentlemen don't trust us, you should at least have faith in Medicine Master Jiang. The medicine master has resided in Chonghua for many years. You know his character and reputation, and you can guess whether he cares about our position. If everyone believes Medicine Master Jiang is working with us to turn you all into living puppets, then fine." The emperor extended his hand carelessly. "Give the pills back to the medicine master. No one will force you to take them."

The officials looked around, exchanging glances, no longer certain whom to trust. If what Wangshu-jun said was true, the emperor would seize control of them as soon as they took this medicine.

But what if it wasn’t true? What if Wangshu-jun accused the emperor out of some ulterior motive? If they put down the medicine now, it was the same as declaring they stood with Murong Lian. If they chose wrongly now, it would be impossible to get the medicine back.

As they wrestled with their uncertainty, they heard the emperor say coldly, “We are at war. The Liao Kingdom has made the demonic beast bring rain and covered Chonghua with demonic qi. We toiled day and night to find some way to counteract this, only for Murong Lian to cast aspersions upon our efforts. We have no interest in defending ourselves; our subjects are free to believe what they’d like.” He turned. “Jiang Fuli.”

“Mn?”

“Take back the pills. They won’t be needing them.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Upon hearing this, some of the nobles finally panicked. Those who’d never trusted Murong Lian took the risk of stepping out first. They swore and pointed at him:

“What lunacy is this? Murong Lian, you’ve always been a degenerate hedonist. You’re the one who rotted to the core and took up that filthy ephemera habit, yet now you’re blaming it on His Imperial Majesty! For shame!”

“That’s just the kind of snake he is! Let’s not act as if we aren’t aware of the despicable tricks he used at the cultivation competition to defeat Xihe-jun back then?”

Another looked over at Mo Xi. “Isn’t that so, Xihe-jun?”

But Mo Xi didn’t respond. Amid the racket, he continued to stare at Jiang Fuli, a frown creasing his brow.

“Xihe-jun…?” the crowd murmured.

Mo Xi didn’t answer. Just as everyone concluded he wasn’t choosing sides, he suddenly addressed Jiang Fuli. “Medicine Master Jiang, you would know better than anyone whether or not there are large quantities of heartbalm in Murong Lian’s pipe. Why not examine it for us?”

Murong Lian turned to glare at him. “Mo Xi, what do you mean by this? This Jiang guy is clearly Murong Chen’s lackey! You want *him* to

examine me?”

But Mo Xi insisted. “Medicine Master Jiang’s operated a healing hall in Chonghua for many years. I don’t think it’s necessarily as you say.”

“Mo Xi, you insolent—”

Even Gu Mang tried to hold him back. “Mo Xi, this isn’t right…” he said softly.

Mo Xi gently freed himself from Gu Mang’s grip and crossed the hall to Murong Lian, taking his pipe. Beneath its owner’s furious gaze, he handed the pipe to Jiang Fuli. “Medicine Master Jiang, if you please.”

After a moment of silence, Jiang Fuli took the pipe and picked out some loose ephemera from the attached pouch, placing it in his palm for careful scrutiny. It was dim in the hall, and the lamps flickered fitfully in the wind. Everyone watched with rapt attention as Jiang Fuli inspected the leaves Murong Lian was smoking.

Yet it was this that allowed Mo Xi to finally confirm his suspicions. In the moment Jiang Fuli raised his head, intending to speak, Mo Xi summoned the holy weapon Shuairan, transforming the snake whip into a sword with its blade pressed to Jiang Fuli’s throat.

The crowd of officials gasped at this unexpected turn of events.

“Xihe-jun?!”

“Th-this is—”

Jiang Fuli narrowed his almond eyes. “Xihe-jun, what do you mean by this?”

“Medicine Master Jiang, aren’t you night-blind in your left eye?” asked Mo Xi icily.

The crowd started in surprise. Indeed…wasn’t Jiang Fuli blind in one eye after nightfall?

“Medicine Master Jiang,” Mo Xi continued darkly, “in the past, you needed a liuli eyepiece to see when the sun went down. Are you about to tell me you’ve suddenly recovered from the night-blindness that’s plagued you for years? Or will you admit that”—he paused, his voice going so cold it seemed to splinter into shards of ice—“you’re not Jiang Fuli at all?”

The officials reeled back in terror. But it was just as Mo Xi said: Jiang Fuli was night-blind, and his condition was very peculiar. He couldn't see with his left eye as soon as night fell, no matter how bright the lamps were burning. He had to put on a liuli eyepiece to go on as usual.

Jiang Fuli's expression shifted slightly. "This humble one has traveled far and wide across the land; what's so strange about having cured my own illness? Did I need to personally notify Xihe-jun when I did so?"

But no one's suspicion was allayed by this explanation. Jiang Fuli had lived in Chonghua so many years, and his night-blindness had never been cured; what were the chances he had coincidentally cured himself at the most improbable moment?

"Oh?" Mo Xi answered. "Then I must congratulate Medicine Master Jiang."

Jiang Fuli swept his sleeves back, snorting.

"There's one more thing I'd like to ask Medicine Master Jiang. Previously, you examined Gu Mang and mentioned that you'd had a patient before with a similar mark on their shoulder. I'm not sure if Medicine Master Jiang remembers what that mark looked like?"

The hall was silent; only the sound of the dripping water-clock echoed in their ears.

Mo Xi waited a long time. When Jiang Fuli didn't respond, he remarked coolly, "How forgetful you are."

This suspicious conversation seemed to have opened the floodgates. One by one, others began to ask Jiang Fuli about things only they and Medicine Master Jiang knew. Under the onslaught of questions, Jiang Fuli's expression grew uglier and uglier. Mo Xi still held the Shuairan sword at his throat. He could feel Jiang Fuli's spiritual flow growing more and more unstable amid this chaos, until it became nearly uncontrolled.

Mo Xi shivered. Withdrawing his sword, he leapt backward and shouted a sharp, "Watch out!"

Some onlookers reacted too slowly to dodge, but in the instant Mo Xi landed, he threw up layer upon layer of barriers. At almost the same time, dazzling silver light erupted from where the faux Jiang Fuli was standing.

The storm of spiritual energy funneled up like winter wind on the frontier, slamming against the barriers with a terrifying crash.

"What… What is this?"

"A monster… It's a monster!"

A blood-curdling scream tore from the center of the blinding light, its sound piercing the roof and shooting toward the heavens. The howl of the evil beast brought with it a burst of pure and potent spiritual energy. The elderly, the frail, and those with weak cultivation felt their chests shudder. Some collapsed to the ground, and others spat up blood.

Murong Lian's lips were bloodstained as well. He slowly retreated to stand beside Mo Xi and Gu Mang. He first looked at Gu Mang, but he found meeting Gu Mang's azure-blue gaze too awkward, and so turned to Mo Xi with a frown. "What the hell is that?"

Mo Xi stared at the silhouette sharpening within the white whirlwind. "Probably the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul that we brought back for him."

As if to confirm his theory, another violent wind rose, and the frantic spiritual flow exploded outward. With a massive *boom*, it blasted a hole in the ceiling of the throne room as the officials shouted and scrambled out of the way. In the downpour of rustling sand and stone, that beam of white light soared up and out of the roof. Beneath the murky night sky, it transformed into a massive whiskered beast with eyes like golden drums.

The creature had the head of an eagle and the body of a dog, its wingspan as great as that of the legendary bird, the peng. Where it flew, thunderstorms followed; the skies above the capital were already beginning to rumble. It looked downward, its massive blue pupils like two jeweled mirrors filled with bright light. Those eyes shone down through the broken tiles and roofbeams onto the myriad expressions of the feast attendees.

Someone screamed, "It's—it's that demon chimera that brought the rain!"

"It wasn't an evil beast from the Liao Kingdom?!"

But others began to understand. They turned toward the man on the throne, their eyes red with shock and bewilderment, as if looking at a

madman.

The emperor of Chonghua, Murong Chen, looked as he always did: sitting on high, the picture of unruffled apathy. The lightning from the demon beast's storm flickered in his black pupils as he gazed at the assembled officials, his lips bowing in a faint, mocking curve.

"Was it really…" someone asked in a shaking voice. "Was it really you who did it?"

"Your Imperial Majesty…"

"Murong Chen! *You* were the one who brought that demonic rain on Chonghua?! It had nothing to do with the Liao Kingdom at all! It was you who wanted to back us into a corner so we'd take your so-called demon-dispelling medicine! You—you created this evil beast!"

The questions came like the onrushing tide. The emperor's smile was fixed, his pale, handsome face suffused with a restrained mania. He interlocked his fingers and said mildly, "We gave you a chance, hoping you would be obedient. We waited many years, but none of you took advantage of the opportunities we presented you. It was time for decisive action."

"Murong Chen! Have you lost your mind? Even the Liao Kingdom has only ever used black magic curses against outsiders. But you, the ruler of our nation, wanting to make your subjects and your people obey you, didn't hesitate to refine a demonic beast to harm the civilians of your own country. You deceived your officials into taking your medicine, and lured them deeper and deeper into your interlocked traps! How—how could you be so evil?! You're unfit to rule!"

The truth burst explosively to the surface. No matter how cowardly they might have been, everyone at the scene—nobles and officials alike—blazed with an unstoppable rage, their faces twisted with fury.

"Incompetent!"

"Worse than a beast!"

Murong Chen scoffed. "What do you plan to do about it? Will my beloved subjects force my abdication?"

"Look at the evil you've done—rashly cultivating dark arts and killing commoners for your own selfish aims. Yet you think you can still be

emperor?”

“Murong Chen, you’re not worthy of the throne!”

“Since when is it up to you to decide if we’re worthy?” Murong Chen burst into laughter, licking his lips and looking around like a predator. “If you plan to overthrow me, you should first worry whether any of you useless imbeciles have the skill for it.” He flung out a hand and commanded, “Jingchen, these subjects are disobedient. Kill all who rebel!”

This strange chimera he’d raised from the remnant of the Demonblood Beast’s soul threw its head back with a shrill cry. In a blink, storm clouds gathered. Within the flying sand and forking lightning, the creature dissolved into a flurry of bright sword glares winging toward the great hall.

They heard the sound of the hall shattering: brick and tile flew in every direction as the countless blades of spiritual energy smashed into the earth like a hailstorm. In their panic and fury, the cultivators beneath the onslaught opened barriers to fend off the attack, but the Demonblood Beast was too powerful. Even a chimera made from a wisp of its remaining soul was an impossible adversary.

“Dad!”

“My lord!”

The scene devolved into chaos. Some of the less nimble old nobles had neglected their cultivation; the Demonblood swords pierced them through before they could defend themselves, sending them to their deaths on the floor of the throne room. The great hall was filled with grieving wails and drawn-out screams.

“Raise barriers! Hurry and raise barriers!”

“Waaah! Someone come help my dad…”

“This demon is too powerful, I can’t hold on anymore…”

Rubble and sword glares pelted down, destroying everything in their path. A small child who had accompanied his father to the feast sat frozen next to his father’s corpse. Just as the child was about to be impaled beneath the second rain of swords, Gu Mang rushed out from behind the barrier.

Murong Lian jumped in shock. “Hey! Are you trying to die?!”

Gu Mang's spiritual energy was gone, but his martial ability remained intact. He grabbed the child and bounded backward, ducking into Mo Xi's barrier formation an instant before the demon beast Jingchen's second wave of strikes landed.

That child might have been saved, but others weren't so fortunate. Jingchen's second attack was fiercer and more ruthless than the first. Many couldn't sustain their defensive barriers. Blood sprayed as the barriers shattered, and they died with their eyes still open.

Mo Xi turned to look at the emperor through the bloody storm. In the face of this carnage, the emperor of Chonghua, Murong Chen, showed not the slightest ripple of emotion, as though this scene was no new shock, but had played out countless times in his mind. Or perhaps these people were really like bamboo warriors to him, pawns to be tossed or abandoned at any moment.

As the tempered demon beast Jingchen reared back for a third attack, blue light gathered in Mo Xi's palm. Staring at the emperor, he snapped: "Tuntian—*come!*"

The scepter appeared from the air as the whale's call split the skies. The formidable holy weapon glowed as it materialized in Mo Xi's waiting hand.

Tuntian's whale form gathered shape, beating its massive tail as it transformed into a barrier that enveloped the entire throne room. Jingchen seemed terrified of Tuntian's spirit. It called back its countless sword glares and returned to its original form of a winged hound. It growled threateningly at the illusory form of the massive Tuntian, but soared higher into the clouds, too afraid to rashly engage the great whale.

Under Tuntian's protection, everyone in the hall caught their breath. Some collapsed panting upon the floor, while others raced over to their fallen kin with tears streaming down their faces. More were filled with boiling hatred, charging recklessly toward the throne intent on killing Murong Chen.

"Murong Chen—!"

"Dad… Waaaah! Dad!"

The tables had turned, yet disconcertingly, Murong Chen showed no hint of fear or surprise. He looked down with an eerie calm, his gaze coming to rest on Mo Xi. A faint smile danced at the corners of his mouth.

Murong Lian narrowed his eyes. “Why are you smiling?”

“How could I not? Xihe-jun is truly capable; he’s been possessed of extraordinary gifts since he was young. The power of Tuntian is marvelous indeed,” Murong Chen said, unhurried. “As for you, Murong Lian, why don’t you use your brain a little? Do you think you’re the first person we used for mind-control experiments? No—I only tested some unproven black magic poisons on you.

“Before I experimented on you, we had a pill—the only pill Chen Tang left behind, created from a seed of the demon tribe’s Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. We refined it into a puppet pill that could lie dormant in its victim’s heart without being detected—the one and only dose of its kind. Ten years ago, we selected someone sufficiently strong and hid this seed inside him. If an unpleasant surprise like today’s ever came to pass, we could awaken that pill, and our chosen victim would immediately lose his sense of self and serve us unconditionally.”

A bone-chilling cold swept up from Mo Xi’s feet and rushed through his chest.

“Murong Lian, who do you think we used it on?”

All eyes turned toward Mo Xi in shocked apprehension; even Mo Xi himself had turned pale.

Murong Chen sat calmly on the lofty throne. “Of course, that was our worst-case scenario,” he said mildly. “We never expected we’d have to use it like this.”

He lifted a finger, a flame springing to life at the tip. Distant light leapt in the depths of the emperor’s black eyes as he stared at Mo Xi, who was protecting everyone in the hall. His teeth clicked softly as he spoke three words: “Puppet pill, activate!”

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Chapter 180:
I'll Protect You

THE EMPEROR'S COMMAND struck fear into the hearts of all who heard it.

Gu Mang's mind was damaged; he didn't understand what exactly was going on, but judging from everyone's reactions, it had something to do with Mo Xi. He was afraid Mo Xi would be hurt, but he didn't know what to do. He stepped instinctively in front of Mo Xi, protecting him from a danger Gu Mang couldn't comprehend.

Everyone other than Gu Mang had scattered to the edges of the hall, trying desperately to save themselves. It was no surprise—they all knew the terrifying extent of Mo Xi's power. If the emperor took control of him, the consequences did not bear thinking about. None of these nobles had a meaningful relationship with Mo Xi; they had no reason to attempt something as futile as rushing over to protect him.

Mo Xi had never imagined the emperor implanted this puppet pill in him long ago. Head ringing, he pushed Gu Mang away. Gu Mang merely stared at him through his clear blue eyes, refusing to budge. "Murong Lian!" Mo Xi shouted sharply. "Take him away!"

"I won't go." Gu Mang struggled free of Murong Lian's grasp. "I'll protect you."

Hot tears welled in Mo Xi's eyes. He turned away from Gu Mang and repeated to Murong Lian, "Take him away."

At this, the emperor sneered. The controlling demonic flame at his fingertips had swelled to a violent blaze. He mouthed the final words of the incantation and brought his fingers together—

Mo Xi pushed Gu Mang away. "Go!"

The flame flashed white-hot, throwing its light over the emperor's expression of long-cherished anticipation. "Enter the heart," he intoned.

That brilliance burst into countless motes that shot through the air toward Mo Xi's chest. Gu Mang was frantic with worry, clumsily trying to shoo them away like so many gnats. It was useless. The motes of light passed through Gu Mang's palms, gathering around Mo Xi with no sign of stopping.

Gu Mang was about to cry from distress. "Mo Xi…"

Murong Lian watched the situation grow worse. Fearing the puppet pill planted in Mo Xi would quickly take effect, he gripped tight to Gu Mang's sleeve and dragged him away. "There's nothing you can do!" he said harshly. "The puppet pill is a medicine made from the demonic Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. The only way to reverse its effect would be offering up your core's spiritual energy; it would take hours! Hurry and come away!"

Murong Chen's expression was twisted with derision. "If you wanted to leave, it's too late," he said nonchalantly.

Those glowing, scattered lights gathered within Mo Xi's body. Mo Xi gritted his teeth and took one last glance at Gu Mang. Then he closed his eyes, pausing before giving Tuntian a low-voiced command: "Kill your master."

Murong Lian started in alarm. He looked up at Mo Xi as he realized Mo Xi was ordering Tuntian to eliminate its wielder as soon as he lost his mind. "Fireball…"

Mo Xi glanced up at him. "Take Gu Mang away."

At the same time, Murong Chen tapped his fingertip in midair and said, "Obey!"

The white light blazed whiter still. Tuntian swam through the night sky, flipping its tail in agitation, as if ready to swoop down at any moment. The roiling spiritual energy flow forced the observers' eyes closed as the light grew brighter and brighter, stronger and stronger.

Gu Mang looked at Mo Xi surrounded by these beams of light, at the expression on Mo Xi's pale face. "Mo Xi!" he cried without thinking.

"Don't go over there!" Murong Lian cried, dragging him back.

Yet as Gu Mang struggled, that ball of white light suddenly flickered erratically. With a *boom*, it scattered into motes of brightness once more, drifting through the air.

Murong Chen's eyes flew wide.

The rest of the hall was similarly stunned. "Wh-what happened…"

The white lights that had been moments away from engulfing Mo Xi's mind fluttered down like fireflies, winking out one by one until they all fell dark.

The throne room was silent again; under the flickering light, Mo Xi looked up in confusion, bringing a hand to his chest. He hadn't lost his mind and become Murong Chen's puppet as he thought he would. Was it because the pill Murong Chen had refined so long ago had lost its effect?

Or…

Murong Chen jumped to his feet, flipping the table and sending the surviving cups crashing to pieces. His expression had changed. He was no longer calm; his eyes showed shock, fury, and disbelief. He gnashed his teeth, speaking as though his voice was crushed between them, the words coming out as dust. "How can this be? Back then, we—we saw you take it with our own eyes—it's impossible… Impossible!"

As he thundered on the dais, he heard a soft sigh.

That gentle sound hadn't come from anyone in the hall. As everyone cast about for its source, they discovered that, at some point, a figure had appeared at the threshold of the splintered vermilion doors. She wore a thin black cloak trimmed in gold draped over her shoulders, her ink-dark hair coiled into a low bun. She was bare of adornment save for a golden clasp in her hair.

Murong Chen narrowed his eyes in disbelief. *"You?!"*

The newcomer was none other than she of the three gentlemen of Chonghua whom the people called Virtue, the nation's princess—Murong Mengze.

As he grasped the truth, Murong Chen seethed with rage. He was so incensed his entire body was trembling, his face a rictus of fury, the whites

of his eyes spiderwebbed with red. “You dare—you dare to betray us!” he roared.

Mengze’s expression was placid, touched with a coolness that might have been pity, or sorrow. She shook her head. “Imperial Brother, it’s you who have overstepped.” She strode into the hall, frowning up at Murong Chen. “I urged you to stop this long ago. It was you who refused to listen—instead, you stooped to this base ruthlessness. Murong Chen, Chonghua doesn’t belong to you alone. Why haven’t you realized this yet?”

She came to a stop at Murong Lian’s side, a clear signal that she had chosen to stand with Murong Lian in this battle, and not with her other elder brother Murong Chen.

Murong Chen stared fixedly at the two of them. That prophecy of strife among brothers the fortuneteller once spoke of rumbled and echoed in his ears. Murong Lian… Murong Lian… For years, he’d pretended to be an ostentatious and spoiled brat. Later, he feigned dissipation and depravity. Murong Chen had truly underestimated this distant brother of his!

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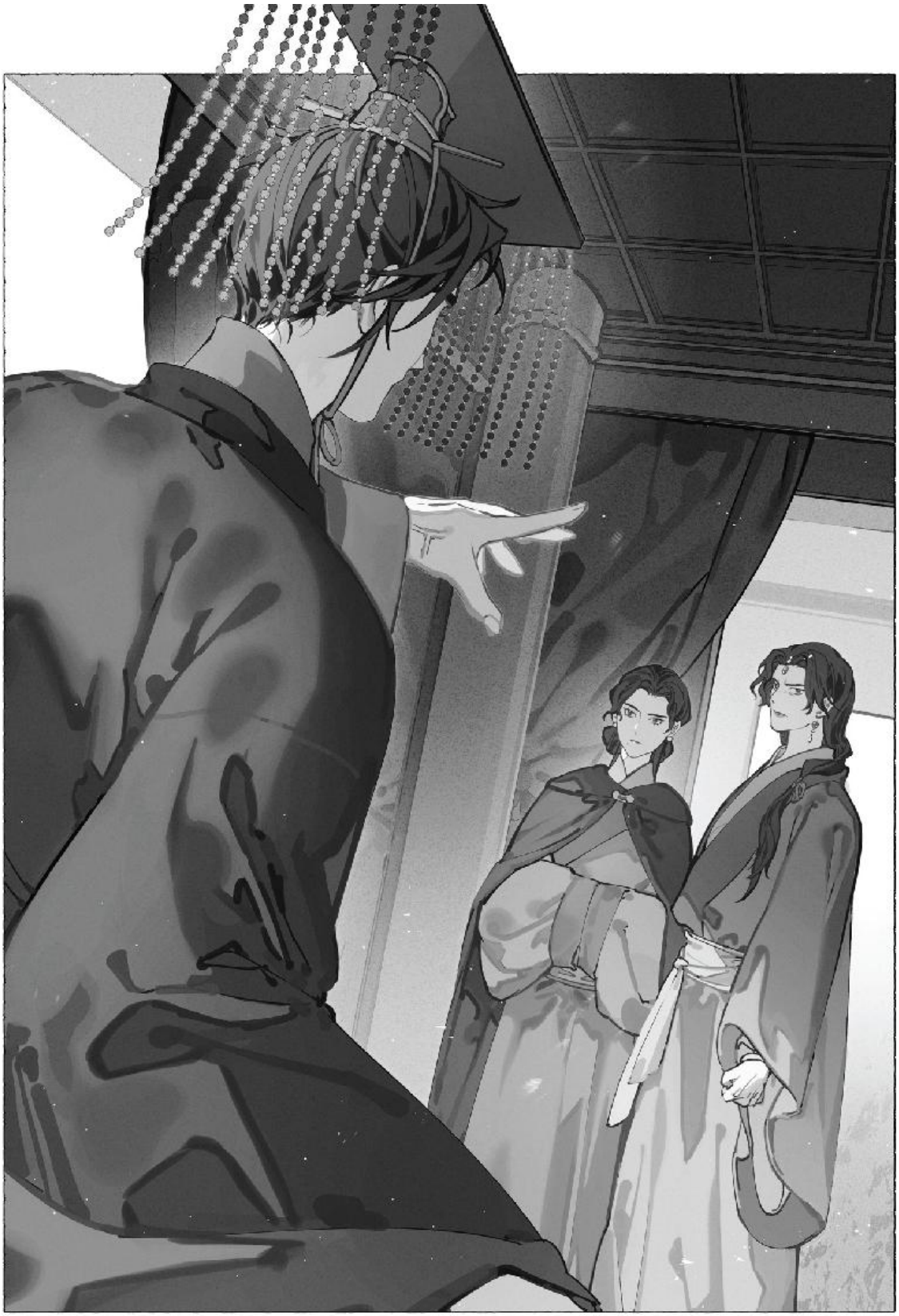

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Murong Lian glanced at Mengze. “Didn’t you go to the hot springs? I didn’t think you’d make it back in time.”

Mengze smiled faintly but said no more. Murong Lian’s casual tone as he addressed her made Murong Chen’s hair stand on end, his fury rising. Something clicked into place, and he narrowed his eyes in threat. “Murong Mengze…how long have you been helping him?”

Murong Lian’s lazy reply came before Mengze could answer: “Not that long—she wasn’t inclined to listen to me at first. If nothing else, you’re Chonghua’s emperor, and she’s an obedient and sensible child. At first, she heeded your orders and kept a watchful eye on me. But you must have gotten anxious when she told you I planned to speak to Gu Mang, and you sent assassins after me by the river in Da’ze. Murong Chen, it was this move that lost you the whole game.

“Do you imagine Mengze would like to see me dead? She’d only feel guilt for making the report. After the cultivators on patrol rescued me, you instructed the elder of Shennong Terrace to use medicine to keep me on the verge of death, refusing to treat me properly. Mengze prepared antidotes for me in secret and saved my life.” Murong Lian smiled lightly. “Otherwise, I would have long since died under such treatment, just as you wished. I wouldn’t be standing here to tell you this today.”

“Very well… Very well!” Murong Chen raged, his gaze flitting between the two of them. At length, he said through his teeth, “Murong Mengze, we have misplaced our trust in you! We favored you for nothing! In the end, you went and helped him instead?!”

“I don’t think of it as helping you or him,” Murong Mengze said. “I only do what’s worthy of me, and worthy of Chonghua.”

Murong Chen looked up and burst into laughter. “Worthy of you? Worthy of Chonghua?” His expression turned as vicious as a vulture’s. “Murong Mengze, you choose to aid a distant relative over your own elder brother by blood. Is this worthy of you? You accept the emperor’s favor and regard, yet you work with an outsider to force him to abdicate. Is *this* worthy of Chonghua?” He snapped his sleeves, and those black and gold robes billowed around him. “What a colossal joke!”

“Chen-ge,” Mengze replied, “if you hadn’t been so ruthless, I would not have gone so far. Ever since you took the throne, you’ve been obsessed with the notion of eliminating dissidents and exterminating every coward and villain in your court. Such a thing is impossible. Every living creature, even beasts, possess selfish motives and desires of their own, myriad ideas of their own…”

“But they are wrong!” Murong Chen raged.

“I didn’t say they were right.” Mengze gazed at him. “Weakness, belligerence, greed, jealousy—none of these are righteous qualities. But it is not within our capabilities to change the desires of others, nor can we alter human nature. Instead of pouring your efforts into making these officials obey your every word, why not persuade them by becoming a worthy ruler and virtuous monarch? Guide your people by example toward a brighter future, rather than wishing for everyone to become your puppet or clay figurine and then force-feeding black magic to all who disobey you. Chen-ge, what Lian-ge once said to me was correct—when there is only one voice left in Chonghua, that will be the nation’s end.”

“Once said to you?” Murong Chen sneered. “So you *are* a two-faced backstabber—you pretended loyalty to me while scheming with Murong Lian… Murong Mengze, as one of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, do you truly feel no guilt?”

Mengze was quiet a moment; she seemed to have tired of arguing, and was unwilling to get into particulars with Murong Chen. But beneath his repeated admonishment, she looked up and said, “As a citizen of Chonghua, I cannot stand by and watch you commit mistake after mistake. Nor can I bear to let you exploit and maim your soldiers, your loyal subjects and your commanders, one after another. Many years ago, you put the puppet pill in Mo-dage’s cup, so that he might transform into your lethal weapon at any moment. Later, you schemed to force Gu Mang onto the path of treason and made him your spy. You found a grandiose incentive he couldn’t refuse, so that he had no choice but to gather intelligence for you and pave your way.”

Murong Mengze’s voice wasn’t loud, but everyone in the great hall was listening with rapt attention. Someone couldn’t help exclaiming, “Gu Mang was a spy? Was he—was he not a traitor…”

“He wasn’t,” she affirmed.

“But this…”

“The battle of Phoenix Cry Mountain was engineered to enable His Imperial Majesty to pick out a spy who could endure a dangerous mission. To obtain him, His Imperial Majesty used Jiang Yexue’s secret techniques to take temporary control of Lu Zhanxing, compelling him to commit the crime of executing another nation’s envoy in front of the troops.”

“Lu Zhanxing was controlled?!”

“Correct,” Murong Mengze answered. “He was controlled by an incomplete Zhenlong chess piece. After Lu Zhanxing was falsely accused and imprisoned, Gu Mang was backed into a desperate corner. At this time, His Imperial Majesty secretly ordered him to flee to the Liao Kingdom and feign surrender. He thus became a spy hidden in the heart of the Liao Kingdom who sent a constant stream of intelligence reports and secret black magic techniques back to Chonghua.”

This information was deeply shocking. Had anyone spoken these words before the court nobles at some other time, they would’ve been mocked as a madman. But the evidence of the current calamity was all around them, the dead and injured strewn over the floor of the throne room, while the demon beast Jingchen still circled and howled in the sky. Tuntian’s protection alone kept the beast at bay. So even though Mengze’s words were unimaginable, they were taken seriously.

Murong Chen still stood before the throne; his martial ability was far from the best in the room, and Jingchen had been blocked by the great whale. For the time being, he couldn’t stop Mengze from talking. He stared at her distantly, perhaps contemplating how to refute what she said, or perhaps pondering ways to tear her open and rip her to shreds. He had once trusted her above all others—she was the only person with whom he let down his guard, his own little sister. He’d never imagined that the one to expose his crimes and put an end to them would be she!

He couldn’t suppress a shrill laugh.

“But if that’s true,” someone called from the crowd, “Gu Mang was helping the enemy! He helped His Im…helped Murong Chen gather

forbidden black magic techniques, and for what benefit? Was he promised wealth and rank when he returned, or endless gold and treasure?”

Enraged, Mo Xi snapped, “He did it for seventy thousand gravestones and a world of equality—what wealth and rank, what gold and treasure? Gu Mang returned so long ago; do you really not know what kind of life he’s lived?!”

Seeing Mo Xi grow furious, Mengze stopped him with a raised hand. Shaking her head minutely, she said, “When His Imperial Majesty convinced Gu Mang to go to Liao, he didn’t tell Gu Mang his true goal. At the time Gu Mang accepted his orders, he thought His Imperial Majesty whole-heartedly wished to thwart the Liao Kingdom, and that he sought to know his enemy in order to defeat it. That’s why he sent report after report to Chonghua. Of course he knew he was being used, but at the time, he hadn’t thought His Imperial Majesty’s selfish motives went so far.”

“So…” the same voice asked, “Gu Mang had no idea Murong Chen wanted to use black magic curses for his own ends—that he even wanted to use black magic curses to control his subjects?”

“Correct. He did not know.”

“No, Mengze.” It was Murong Lian who had spoken up. “You’re wrong about this. Regarding His Imperial Majesty’s desire to use black magic against his own subjects… Gu Mang may not have known it at the beginning, but he became aware of it later.”

Hearing this, a furrow appeared between Mo Xi’s slender brows. “How can that be? If he knew, he would have exposed it to Chonghua.”

But Murong Lian shook his head. “He had no way of sending word to Chonghua. Reporting it would’ve been pointless; he would’ve thrown away His Imperial Majesty’s trust for nothing. But he did indeed discover it early on.”

After a pause, he said under everyone’s shocked gazes, “Fireball, Gu Mang discovered our emperor’s true ambition long ago, before the battle of Dongting Lake, before he stabbed you. The empire’s Beast of the Altar isn’t some idiot who let himself be continually exploited.”

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Chapter 181:
Gu Mang's Arrangements

"HE KNEW OF THIS at the battle of Dongting Lake?" Mengze exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Then—then he… He purposefully stabbed Mo-dage and didn't stop me from taking him away, so I would discover Mo-dage's spiritual core had been implanted with the puppet pill."

Murong Lian nodded. "Very likely."

"Precisely because I had to heal the injury to Mo-dage's core, I discovered the puppet pill and did everything in my power to cut it out," Mengze murmured. "But I never reported it to His Imperial Majesty—I found it suspicious at the time, and only after investigation did I discover it was His Imperial Majesty's own secret scheme…" She turned to Gu Mang, completely oblivious as to the events of his own past, and her face paled. "You…you did it on purpose…"

Gu Mang looked back at her in confusion. "What? Did what on purpose?"

"Impossible." Mo Xi shook his head. "I read the letters Gu Mang wrote to His Imperial Majesty; he sent intelligence reports throughout all five years. If he'd known about this, why would he willingly continue offering black magic incantations to His Imperial Majesty?"

"But Fireball, did you not feel that Gu Mang's earlier letters contained large amounts of critical information pertaining to the use of black magic spells from the Liao Kingdom, while later ones only included reports regarding the war or political situation, and rarely discussed black magic techniques?"

Mo Xi thought back on the letters he'd read and realized it was indeed as Murong Lian described.

“Gu Mang knew if he were exposed, Murong Chen would silence him without the slightest hesitation,” said Murong Lian. “Or perhaps he’d forsake this first pawn and find another to gather secret techniques from the Liao Kingdom. Even once he’d seen through Murong Chen’s aims, he never showed it, and sent letters to His Imperial Majesty as usual. But he became cautious; his letters rarely detailed any black magic techniques. If they were mentioned, he only wrote down a few points that seemed specific but had no practical value.”

“…How do you know all this?” asked Mo Xi.

Murong Lian filled his pipe with more ephemera, lit it, and took a drag. Haloed by a cloud of pale gray smoke, he said gravely, “Because Gu Mang told me.”

Mo Xi’s expression changed. “When?”

“The day before he was sent back to the city as a gift for peace talks.”

As everyone stared in shock, Murong Lian went on, “Don’t be so surprised—His Imperial Majesty put me in charge of Gu Mang’s punishment. The day before he returned to the city, I met with him in secret.”

“On his way back from the Liao Kingdom?”

“On his way back, right on the banks of the Fushui River.”

Faced with Mo Xi’s silence, Murong Lian continued, “Everyone believes the Liao Kingdom excised Gu Mang’s memories and shattered his spiritual core, then removed two of his souls, leaving him in this bizarre state.” A pause. “But that’s not true. The Liao Kingdom did ruin Gu Mang’s mind to prevent him from exposing their secrets, but they didn’t touch any memories that weren’t relevant to Liao. So, firstly: the Liao Kingdom wasn’t responsible for destroying all of Gu Mang’s memories.”

The gathered officials clamored fearfully at Murong Lian:

“What?!”

“It wasn’t the Liao Kingdom?!”

“Correct. Secondly, everyone says Gu Mang’s two souls were taken by the Liao Kingdom, but this is false as well. No one removed Gu Mang’s

souls—he gave them up himself for a different reason. He sacrificed them willingly; it had nothing to do with the Liao Kingdom."

This was Murong Lian's most astonishing statement yet, setting off a massive wave of surprise that dwarfed the earlier ripples.

Mo Xi took a step back, his already pale lips devoid of color. "How…could that be? Why did he…"

"As for why he did this, His Imperial Majesty will know best." Murong Lian shot a glance at Murong Chen. "Let's not speak of that yet. We still have the last item to discuss: that is, thirdly, Gu Mang lost his memories on the banks of the Fushui. The man responsible was none other than our ruler of Chonghua!"

Murong Chen's gaze was as sharp as a raptor's. "Murong Lian, is there no end to your lies?!"

"I figured you would say that," Murong Lian replied mildly. "You previously wanted to assassinate me over this very knowledge. There's no getting around it—unfortunately, the person you sent to administer Gu Mang's memory-erasing powder…" He raised his peach-blossom eyes. "Was me."

Murong Chen glared at him in silence.

"I've always seen Gu Mang as a thorn in my side," said Murong Lian. "When I learned of his treason, I felt wholly disgraced. He had brought shame to Wangshu Manor, and I wished him dead. His Imperial Majesty noticed my mood and summoned me in secret to the palace. That's when he revealed to me that Gu Mang wasn't actually a traitor, but a spy."

"If you knew he was a spy, why did you continue to hate him so?" Mengze asked softly.

"As if it was so simple," Murong Lian scoffed. "His Imperial Majesty told me Gu Mang had gone to Liao as a spy, but had demanded, halfway through his mission, that His Imperial Majesty make him the master of Wangshu Manor should he successfully return."

"Gu Mang would never ask for such a thing," said Mo Xi.

"How was I supposed to know that?" Murong Lian rolled his eyes. "His Imperial Majesty knew of my resentment toward Gu Mang and told

me he hadn’t agreed to Gu Mang’s conditions. He said that when he refused Gu Mang’s demands to usurp my position, Gu Mang grew resentful and his false treason became real. His Imperial Majesty claimed that after this, Gu Mang worked whole-heartedly for the Liao Kingdom in retaliation against Chonghua.”

Everyone in Chonghua knew how horribly Murong Lian had once abused Gu Mang. Gu Mang had ample motive to leverage his success as a spy to bring down his former master—the emperor’s lies were all too believable. As the head of Wangshu Manor, how would Murong Lian have felt upon hearing of this?

“Of course, I was furious,” said Murong Lian. “But I also found it strange—if Gu Mang had truly turned traitor, why would the Liao Kingdom send him back as a gift for negotiations of peace?”

Mo Xi shot a glance at the emperor. “What did he say?” he asked Murong Lian.

“His story was watertight. He said he couldn’t tolerate Gu Mang’s treachery and wrote a secret missive to the King of Liao, revealing that Gu Mang was a spy when he defected to the Liao Kingdom and that he’d shared Liao secrets with Chonghua. The Liao Kingdom therefore decided he was two-faced and deceitful; they could no longer trust him, so they sent him back.”

Murong Lian took another drag of ephemera before continuing. “Murong Chen told me Gu Mang was a coward afraid of death. He had sensed the motives of the Liao Kingdom before they moved to capture him. To parlay for his safety, Gu Mang wrote to His Imperial Majesty, claiming he’d found the secret chamber where the Liao Kingdom was gestating the Demonblood Beast, and that he’d seen the juvenile form of the creature within. He was willing to use his soul to seal the beast and secretly bring it back to His Imperial Majesty in exchange for keeping his life.

“I completely trusted His Imperial Majesty and utterly hated Gu Mang. In my rage, I asked him if we seriously planned to accept this traitor’s demands. That’s when His Imperial Majesty told me Gu Mang had undergone black magic tempering. No one knew what kind of demon he might become if we rashly killed him, so our hands were tied. He’d therefore agreed to Gu Mang’s proposal, but he requested that I do two

things. The first was to secretly meet with Gu Mang before the squadron transporting him entered the city and force him to hand over the soul-box in which the Demonblood Beast was sealed."

"And the second?" asked Mo Xi.

"The second was the pill. For Gu Mang to have risen to such heights from his lowly birth was evidence of his ruthlessness and cunning, he said. We couldn't kill him due to the risk of black magic mutation, but if we allowed him to remain lucid, his lies would continue to influence those around him…the jailer, the overseer, so on and so forth. Who knew what story he would spin with his skills? We had to destroy his mind and take his memories—this was the purpose of the pill. He ordered me to make Gu Mang take it after he handed over the Demonblood Beast soul-box."

Mo Xi's fingernails sank deep into his palms as these truths from the past floated up to the surface. The spider-silk web of deception the emperor had spun was at last revealed, an inescapable net trapping them all within. He asked, voice low, "But when you met with Gu Mang, did he not tell you the truth…"

"He did say some things, such as imploring me not to trust His Imperial Majesty overmuch. But whom do you think I believed? Besides, by the time I saw Gu Mang, the guards transporting him seemed to have already tortured him—he was barely coherent, and there was a wound on his chest still seeping blood. He passed out before he could say much."

Murong Lian paused. "But one thing did rouse my suspicions: in addition to the soul-box sealing the Demonblood Beast, he gave me something else. He told me to safeguard it, then find a chance to destroy it if I could; he said His Imperial Majesty mustn't learn of it no matter what."

"What did he give you?" asked Murong Mengze.

He didn't immediately respond. Instead, he looked up at Murong Chen on his lofty throne. "Your Imperial Majesty, you went to such trouble sending Mo Xi to bring you another wisp of the Demonblood Beast's soul from Da'ze City before you could refine this chimeric monster of yours. It's because you still can't open the original soul-box Gu Mang presented to you, right?" He burst into laughter. "Why do you think you can't open it?"

At this point, it was futile to keep pretending. Murong Chen glowered. “Why?”

Murong Lian exhaled misty smoke and replied carelessly, “Because Gu Mang forged that box with one of his souls, and he made some unique adjustments to it. You can’t open it without the key.”

“The key—that’s what Gu Mang asked you to keep safe?” Mengze exclaimed.

“Correct,” Murong Lian said. “Back then, I decided to keep this matter to myself.” He looked dispassionately at Murong Chen. “Your Imperial Majesty couldn’t open the soul-box you took such pains to procure; you must have studied it for a long time without any success. It’s a good thing I’m a suspicious person. I knew you were crafty, and I didn’t fully trust you. Otherwise, you might’ve turned everyone in Chonghua into carved wooden puppets shortly after Gu Mang returned to the capital.”

Murong Chen stared at Murong Lian and ground his teeth. He burst into peals of ruthless laughter. “Murong Lian… Murong Lian, you—you trusted neither Gu Mang nor I since the start…”

“That’s right,” Murong Lian replied carelessly.

“Have you ever trusted anyone?”

“In this, you and I are the same, Murong Chen,” Murong Lian said indifferently. “We’re both the type who trusts no one but ourselves.” With this, his expression went distant. “This farce has gone on long enough. It’s time to kiss your dream of conquering the Nine Provinces goodbye—I destroyed Gu Mang’s key long ago.”

Murong Chen laughed for a long time. When the sound finally stopped echoing, he stared at Murong Lian through scarlet eyes. His gaze swept over the assembled crowd—Mo Xi, Gu Mang, Murong Mengze… along with the rest of the subjects. At last, with an expression as foreboding as a resentful spirit’s, he asked, “Murong Lian, after so many years of study, do you really presume we never found an alternative method to open the soul-box Gu Mang sealed?”

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Chapter 182:
Insanity

MURONG LIAN LAUGHED derisively. “If Your Imperial Majesty could open that box, why would you have bothered to snatch the remnant of the Demonblood Beast’s soul from Da’ze? Besides, the Liao Kingdom has already reared a new Demonblood Beast. All it needs is a piece of soul and a source of power. If Your Imperial Majesty were to open the soul-box now, you’d gain nothing. Instead, you’d only make the Liao Kingdom’s beast more powerful and hasten its revival.” Murong Lian paused. “You wouldn’t be so stupid as to toil for someone else’s gain.”

“That depends on whom we are toiling for.” Murong Chen’s eyes were like two pools of venom, cruel and sharp. “Murong Lian, you know me. We’ve always despised traitors more than we feared outside threats.”

Murong Lian’s expression flickered. Their emperor had lived in the shadow of that oracle’s curse since he was young and was constantly wary of those around him. Most of the blood that stained his fangs belonged to his brothers and comrades; he was even insane enough to attempt black magic curses for controlling his subjects and making everyone subservient to his command. Even so, Murong Lian had never thought Murong Chen would disregard the safety of all of Chonghua. What was there for a ruler to govern if the nation was gone? But he looked at Murong Chen’s face and saw that hatred had overcome rationality; he had the air of someone ready to fight with no holds barred. Murong Lian couldn’t suppress a sudden shiver of fear, though he didn’t let it show. He replied coolly, “What do you plan to do?”

“We should be asking *you* this question,” Murong Chen shot back, hateful. “You hid your ambition for so many years. Wasn’t it all so you could profit from the struggles on both sides and overthrow us today?” He pointed toward the throne with a wave of his sleeves. “So that you could take our position and become the ruler of Chonghua?”

“It really wasn’t,” said Murong Lian blandly. “I think your position is pretty stupid. What are you but a dusty old shrine? I have no interest in

becoming an idol sculpted from clay."

"Who'd believe you?" scoffed Murong Chen. He raised a hand and formed a fist, crying sharply, "Unseal!"

With that explosive shout, thunderous rumbling sounded from outside the hall. The crowd looked over in fear. Through the broken wall and open windows, they could see the highest building in Chonghua's imperial palace—the Golden Terrace—aglow with a blinding light. A colossal seal array in the shape of a pentacle floated above it, spinning ceaselessly as spiritual flames roared skyward.

A violent wind rose, whipping withered branches and rotten wood into the air as all the foliage around the Golden Terrace bent and buckled in the gale. That terrace on high, the emblem of fathomless glory for the subjects of Chonghua, that holy ground visible to the entire capital, was engulfed in flying shards of stone and dust.

As the golden light steadily intensified, the pentacle seal opened. A box small enough to fit in one's palm, emitting dazzling radiance that belied its small size, flew out from a crack in the mountain to hover high in midair.

"This is…the soul-box General Gu forged with one of his souls…" Mengze murmured.

She heard a muffled groan behind her, followed by the thump of someone falling to their knees. Turning, she saw Gu Mang had crumpled to the floor and was coughing up a mouthful of blood.

Mo Xi was at his side immediately, anxious. "Are you all right?"

"I…" Gu Mang seemed to want to speak, but the second he looked toward the distant soul-box, he choked out another mouthful of dark blood and passed out in Mo Xi's arms.

"Gu Mang!"

Mengze, being a healer, saw at once what had happened. "He's affected by the soul-box being unsealed. This box is one of the souls he's missing. General Gu can't stand its soul-force right now, but there shouldn't be lasting harm." Her eyes widened. "Ah! If we can take the soul-box and merge it with him again, his souls should recover a little—"

The emperor cut in darkly, "Don't even dream of it."

“Murong Chen, I have no interest in your position!” Murong Lian snapped. “Come to your senses before you do something truly insane!”

Murong Chen snorted coldly. “Indeed, there’s no need for you to take our position,” he said, gnashing his teeth. “We would be an idiot if we thought we could still sit securely on the throne after today—who doesn’t know what happens to emperors who step down? We would rather tear this nation down with our own hands than watch you step on our shoulders to attain its peak.”

“Murong Chen!” Murong Lian raged. “Chonghua is your motherland! Because of your own selfish paranoia, you’d go as far as letting the treacherous Liao Kingdom obtain the power of the Demonblood Beast? You’re perfectly fucking aware of what would happen if this creature were to reappear! Will you take all of Chonghua and the rest of the Nine Provinces to the grave with you?!”

Against all expectations, Murong Chen laughed maliciously. “And whyever not?”

Rage surged through the crowd like a tidal wave. Even those who were useless and muddled along in ignorance found themselves heated at the emperor’s indifference. Cries of condemnation quickly filled the hall.

“Murong Chen! You’re a monster!”

“You dared call other people selfish? The most selfish and cold-blooded madman on earth is you!”

“Callous and heartless! You wish harm on your loyal subjects!”

“If you can’t be emperor, you’d let the wolf into the fold and destroy the entirety of the Nine Provinces?!”

Murong Chen’s laughter grew louder. “Isn’t this how it should be? If I’m not ruling—if I’m not the emperor—what does the Nine Provinces or any of Chonghua have to do with me?!”

“You—!”

“When I lived in the harem, when my prospects were dim, when my father wanted to cast me aside, when my position was uncertain—in those years before I ascended the throne, and even after I became emperor, was there anyone who genuinely stood by me? Was there anyone who helped

me think and plan, sharing in my triumphs and shouldering my concerns? All of you only ever saw me as a contender for the throne, as the crown prince, as the emperor—who's ever seen me as Murong Chen? Who's ever cared about what I think? Even my own father tried to set me aside once he heard I was sick. Did he think what would happen to a discarded crown prince after he passed away?!"

"Why do you think he never thought of it?" Murong Lian cut in. "When he secretly called me to his sickbed, he told me that if he declared me his heir, I had to treat you well. He knew your freezing illness was his fault. He felt *remorse*!"

Murong Chen froze, his bloodshot eyes alarmingly wide. "He was faking it!" he snarled. "He told *you* about my freezing illness, so what regret could he have felt? How could he have been remorseful?!" He swept his sleeves in fury. "Throughout our life, all we've ever had is the throne. The realm of the Nine Provinces and the common people of Chonghua are relevant only to the emperor; they have nothing to do with Murong Chen! If I were the emperor, then of course I'd worry about and care for Chonghua. But since you're forcing me to abdicate, reducing me to a slave, I will be merely Murong Chen. And Murong Chen owes no care to anyone!" He narrowed his eyes, each word ground to dust between his teeth. "You're correct—I do this for my own satisfaction. I'll hurt myself if it means harming others; I'd rather guide the wolf into the fold and give the Liao Kingdom an advantage. I'd rather do this than let you do as you wish!"

"Murong Chen, you're mad!"

He snorted. "You'd better get this straight: even in death, we will always be sovereign, never a slave!"

He brought both hands together before his chest. Instantly, his robes billowed fiercely in a fey wind. Interlocking his fingers, he roared, "Feihuang, *unseal*!"

A shriek like a phoenix's cry tore from the bowels of the earth as Murong Chen's figure burst into towering flames. He leapt into the sky through the broken ruins of the roof, the massive conflagration surrounding him entirely, just as when Gu Mang had unleashed his demonic qi and unsealed his faewolf blood. Murong Chen's body glowed with phoenix light, the spiritual energy raging toward the heavens.

“How… How does he have demonic beast qi inside him?” Mengze exclaimed.

Mo Xi shook his head. “It’s spirit beast qi.”

“What’s that?”

“The old emperor once attempted to rear a spirit beast, but the flow of spiritual energy went out of control. The qi invaded Murong Chen through the old emperor; that’s how he has this sort of ability.” Mo Xi formed a sigil and gave a sharp command: “Tuntian, stop him!”

The spiritual form of the massive whale emitted a shrill call above them, beating its tail as it swam toward Murong Chen.

But Murong Chen was a force to be reckoned with; drunk on hatred, he thought of nothing but destroying everything in his sight, refusing to be reduced to anyone’s servant. He shouted at the remnant soul of Jingchen hovering in the sky beside him, “Attack!”

At his command, Jingchen flapped its wings and charged toward Tuntian.

The two colossal figures clashed in midair, their howls and cries rattling everyone’s insides. The sky full of stars faded amid the explosive flow of spiritual energy more dazzling than day, the collision spraying sparks like fireworks, shattering into countless fragments beneath the dome of the sky.

This time, no one sought to hide. Whether out of rage or desperation, or because they simply had no other choice, the cultivators in the hall all summoned their own techniques to fight. They leapt out of the throne room, regardless of how bountiful their spiritual energy was, or how much of a shameless toady they’d been in the past. Some helped Tuntian beat back Jingchen, while others chased Murong Chen toward the Golden Terrace with furious shouts. Some raced off to notify Chonghua’s soldiers, awakening the city from its slumber.

Changfeng-jun, trembling with fury, sent out a barrage of messenger spells, circulating the news to every nook and cranny of Chonghua’s capital.

A little gongzi from the Bureau of Military Affairs, one who had always been a hypocrite, had lost his father in the earlier battle. Face stained

with tears, he made arrangements to summon the imperial guards: “Deploy all cultivators available! Protect and defend the nation!”

The elder of Shennong Terrace who had been the emperor’s lackey saw the situation going south. Yet as he tried to slip away, he felt a dagger pressed against his hip. He turned to meet Zhou He’s dark, cold gaze.

“Zhou-xiong, i-it’s me,” he sputtered. “You know the emperor forced both of our hands—I assisted him with Wangshu-jun, and y-you helped him create the Demonblood Beast.”

Zhou He grabbed the elder by the neck and leaned in to speak low into his ear. “I didn’t put full effort into creating Jingchen. Do you think something derived from one of the Demonblood Beast’s souls would be *this* weak? I was never one of His Imperial Majesty’s stooges, unlike you.”

“Zhou-xiong…”

But it was too late to say anything more; Zhou He had shoved the dagger through the elder’s chest with a spurt of fresh blood. Scarlet dyed his fingers. Zhou He licked his lips, eyes narrowing in satisfaction at the smell of copper, and yanked out the blade. The elder swayed briefly, staring blankly ahead, before collapsing to the ground. Zhou He raised the dagger Lieying and licked the tip of the blade.

Conflict raged on all sides. Magical flames burst into the sky like volcanic eruptions, spreading from the palace throughout all of Chonghua. In the chaos, Mo Xi found Murong Lian and shoved the unconscious Gu Mang into his arms. “Look after him—I’ll go stop Murong Chen.”

Murong Lian shot Gu Mang a disdainful glance, clicking his tongue. “I don’t give a damn whether he lives or dies. He’s born of the Murong Clan, yet look at the state of him.”

Despite his words, he took Gu Mang from Mo Xi.

Mengze glanced at Murong Chen, in combat with multiple old nobles over the palace roofs. With his power now unsealed, Murong Chen was a formidable opponent. Those nobles’ combined attacks only managed to slow him down. One strike from Murong Chen’s blazing phoenix apparition and the cultivators closest to him vomited blood and toppled, falling from the sky.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to catch up,” Mengze said anxiously. “If he reaches the Golden Terrace, he’ll sacrifice his own life to open the soul-box…”

Mo Xi knew there was no time to lose. Without another word, he summoned Shuairan and leapt onto the roof to swiftly chase after Murong Chen.

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Chapter 183:
Recovery

UP IN THE SKY, Murong Chen was battling dozens of cultivators; many had already sustained heavy injuries and were incapable of continuing the fight. Murong Chen summoned his own holy weapon, that bamboo xiao, its bleak sound ringing out over the city. Another group chasing him was unable to endure this burst of spiritual energy and fell behind. He sneered, phoenix feathers fluttering as he streaked toward the Golden Terrace.

Yet as he reached for the soul-box, a scarlet flame barrier fell before him. A circle of fire blazed in the air and surrounded the entirety of the Golden Terrace.

Murong Chen turned, wings beating and rage in his eyes. “Xihe-jun. You too have come to stop us?”

Through the flickering gold and red sparks, Mo Xi studied the emperor’s face. This man had once worn a thousand masks, some kind and some evil, some furious and some compassionate. He had spent his life like this—living behind innumerable facades, his original face long since lost. Even now, as he stared at Mo Xi with a palpable anger, his emotions seemed insincere. Murong Chen had always been His Imperial Majesty. There was no way for him to return to being simply himself.

This person’s manifold lies and layered schemes flashed through Mo Xi’s mind like a revolving carousel lantern. Mo Xi’s fury may have been silent, but it was deep. He couldn’t bear to waste another syllable on the emperor. He shot forward, the Shuairan snake whip ripping through the air like lightning, straight for Murong Chen’s heart.

Murong Chen had no time to dodge; he enclosed himself in Feihuang’s wings to block Mo Xi’s blow, gritting his teeth. “What brilliant work, Mengze—you actually removed the puppet pill!”

Shuairan flashed out again like a swift beam of light, striking at Murong Chen’s abdomen. “I have nothing more to say to you,” Mo Xi said

icily. He leapt up from a barrier array in midair. Soaring into the sky, he slammed down the snake whip, which burst with scarlet light.

This time, Murong Chen didn't dare let himself become distracted. He snapped open those phoenix wings as he dodged, evading the attacks that fell upon him like torrential rain. He was under no illusions about his decision to fight like this—what he'd done was akin to the unsealing move Gu Mang had used to pit his Lone Wolf technique against the Liao guoshi. When cultivators unleashed the spiritual form of the demon or spirit beast inside them, their power in battle would increase immeasurably for a short period of time, but it was a move that risked everything. He'd have use of the spirit beast's power for an incense time at most. After that brief period, his meridians would explode, and he'd lose whatever remained of his spiritual energy. If he wanted to release the destructive power of the Demonblood Beast, he had to get the soul-box while he could, and use his own soul and life-force to shatter it.

But Mo Xi was far too formidable an opponent; as Murong Chen met attack after attack, he was beaten back into retreat. Fiery light blazed up across Chonghua City, and soldiers and cultivators rushed toward them from all corners of the capital, silver light flashing from their weapons as they streaked over on mounted swords. The steady stream of reinforcements was like a winding dragon brandishing its malevolent claws as it soared toward the emperor, ready to swallow him up in this rebellion.

"Everything ends here," said Mo Xi, transforming Shuairan into a sword. With a flare of cold light, the blade hurtled toward Murong Chen.

Storm clouds suddenly roiled in the sky. A beam of white light pierced the depths of the clouds like a sharp sword unsheathing. Before anyone could react, a bolt of lightning crashed down from on high.

The blinding light struck the Golden Terrace, extinguishing the protective barrier of flames Mo Xi had set around the platform. The encircling inferno that had bloodied half the sky was snuffed into an expanse of scorched earth, hissing with gray smoke. Mo Xi's face went white, and he fell heavily to one knee on his barrier in the clouds.

Murong Chen was stunned; he swiftly realized what had happened. Squinting through the smoke, he mumbled, "The Vow of Calamity…"

In the chaos of the fight, everyone had forgotten that Mo Xi had sworn the Vow of Calamity, pledging eternal loyalty to Chonghua and its emperor. Mo Xi hadn't violated the first part, but the second triggered the vow the instant Mo Xi moved to take the emperor's life. A calamity had descended from the highest heavens to smash Mo Xi's barrier and strike its caster. Mo Xi remained on his knees, head bowed, and choked out a mouthful of blood.

"Hah…" Murong Chen stared at Mo Xi. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he burst into sinister laughter. "Ha ha… Ha ha ha ha…!"

Now unimpeded, he landed atop the Golden Terrace and came to stand before the gleaming soul-box. The reinforcement troops converging from all directions had yet to arrive. The emperor's face was ghoulish, distorted by hatred and madness.

"Fireball, it's all thanks to you being so fixated on protecting your Gu Mang-gege's subordinates that you took the Vow of Calamity." He reached out, hand hovering over the soul-box, his face ghastly pale in the little box's halo of light. "Remember this well—you had the power to stop us, but it was your past obsession that helped us push this disobedient nation into the depths of hell!"

Mo Xi struggled to his feet. Even if he was reduced to ashes by the heavenly calamity, he would stop Murong Chen from obtaining that box.

But it was already too late. To maintain consciousness under the torment of an ancient vow was a near-impossible task, to defy the will of heaven even more so. The clouds above seemed to seethe with anger; bolts of lightning hissed as they cracked across the sky, ready to touch down and reduce this hapless mortal to dust.

Murong Chen brought his hands together, securely clasping the box from top and bottom.

A beam of dazzling golden light shot up to the heavens, colliding with the storm raging in the sky. A furious clamor sounded, and the world flashed strangely, as if infinite vengeful ghosts were about to break through the shuddering earth.

Choking, Mo Xi pushed past the restraints of the Vow of Calamity. Facing that brilliance that threatened to turn into countless sharp swords and

pierce him through, he shot toward Murong Chen.

"You…*can't*…"

But Murong Chen had already flown into the skies. Holding the box sealing the power of the Demonblood Beast, he poured his soul and life-force into it. The little liuli box that Gu Mang had condensed from his own soul wailed in his palms as cracks crawled over its surface.

Murong Chen threw his head back, his laughter like an owl's chilling cries. He had perhaps never laughed so freely in his life—without the slightest concealment or affectation, without the slightest forethought or worry. He laughed long and loud in the whistling wind, looking down at this capital city that had imprisoned him all his life. And then, with a final howl, he crushed the soul-box between his palms.

Its fragments instantly scattered into the air. Black magic spiritual energy poured from the shattered soul-box like a dark wave, surging out into the vast world, screaming in rage as it spread over the entirety of the realm. In a blink, the stars vanished, and the moon was blotted out. The burst of energy devoured Murong Chen in an instant; he was already no more than a translucent apparition. Yet his eyes still glinted with reproach as he gazed down at the scene of desolation beneath his feet, his voice weak yet unmistakably deranged. "Look! This is the choice you made—all of you! You refused to bend to our will and made our life impossible, so we will deprive you…of all peace!"

As his final words rang out, the spiritual energy of the Demonblood Beast tore his fading specter to pieces. Only that hair-raising laughter still swirled like an echo amid the maelstrom of demonic energy: "The power of the Demonblood Beast has been unsealed!"

Shocked cries and miserable screams rose up from the imperial city; the flames of every candle throughout the capital shuddered with fear. The energy rushing from the soul-box grew ever stronger as the gap in the air where Murong Chen had been devoured emitted a blinding white light.

Mo Xi, closest to the array, felt an impossible weight pressing down on his spine—a sense of overwhelming insignificance before an impending catastrophe that was nearly enough to break him.

He lost consciousness almost at once. In the moment his eyes fluttered shut, he seemed to see a wisp of golden light floating from the shattered soul-box, nothing like the overbearing black magic energy around him. That golden light formed an indistinct silhouette. It was a much younger Gu Mang, in his armor and helmet, his face bright and relaxed. Leaping up from the shards of the soul-box, he flew toward the boiling sky.

Mo Xi reached out with Gu Mang's name on his lips, but his throat was filled with acrid blood. Those two syllables were stoppered in his throat.

Gu…Mang…

He fell. Down, down, down from the fierce battle raging in midair, until at last, he crashed into heavy darkness.

When Mo Xi awoke, he found himself lying in bed, surrounded by blurred figures moving past him in white and green. His long lashes quivered as his view of his surroundings gradually cleared.

He was in one of Shennong Terrace's healing pavilions; those flickering figures were healers from the ministry. They moved between the sickbeds, treating injured cultivators. As Mo Xi came more awake, human speech poured into his ringing ears—the sounds of crying from a nearby bed, words of comfort exchanged among family members, the incantations of healers as they cast their spells.

He gradually gathered his awareness amid these sounds, and the events from before he fell unconscious flashed back into his mind. The rebellion in the throne room, the appearance of Jingchen, the soul-box, the brilliant light…

"Gu Mang!"

He sat bolt upright, agony tearing across his injuries. His long lashes fluttered down as he frowned, eyes closed tightly beneath his pitch-black brows.

His movement had attracted notice; someone hastily approached his sickbed. "Mo-dage."

Mo Xi pressed a hand to his forehead, kneading his aching temples. A pair of scarlet eyes met Murong Mengze's gaze.

Mengze looked as if she hadn't taken proper care of herself in days. Her hair was pulled into the simplest of buns, and she wore her customary black robes with golden trim. At some point, she'd acquired a smudge of soot on her cheek.

Mo Xi opened his mouth; his throat was painfully dry, and he swallowed with difficulty. Only then could he speak with something approaching his normal tone. "What's…going on? Where's Gu Mang? What happened with the Demonblood Beast, the Liao Kingdom—"

Eyes moist, Mengze glanced around. She hardly needed to say it; from this look, Mo Xi could guess Chonghua's current circumstances. The largest healing pavilion in Shennong Terrace was filled with injured cultivators; some bore spell injuries or blade wounds, while others had been infected with black magic and were bound with spirit-locking chains to icy stone beds. In one glance, he saw many faces he knew.

In the distance, Yue Chenqing was speaking to a healer. A mere two weeks had passed since Mo Xi had last seen him, but Yue Chenqing no longer had the look of a youth. He frowned deeply, with no hint of mirth in his speech. He was teaching the healers how to control his bamboo warriors, which could help in the chaos of these casualties.

"The power of the Demonblood Beast is free. After Jingchen absorbed the spiritual energy, it flew toward the Liao Kingdom and fulfilled Murong Chen's dying wish." Mengze's expression was unsightly on her lovely face. "Since obtaining the Demonblood Beast's power, the Liao Kingdom has become unstoppable. They've advanced to the walls of the capital city. Lian-ge took command and has barely held them off for the last seven days, but I'm afraid it won't last. We hear the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom is about to leave seclusion—he was finishing Jingchen's new refinement. Tomorrow, the Demonblood Beast will likely walk the earth again."

"…I've been asleep for seven days?" asked Mo Xi.

Mengze nodded, then hastily added upon seeing his expression, "Don't worry—though the situation is dire, our defeat isn't certain. Didn't Preceptor Chen put a stop to the Demonblood Beast's destruction back

then? Lian-ge is restructuring the military forces in the capital. He's preparing three major armies and planning to meet Liao in battle tomorrow."

Mo Xi closed his eyes. "It doesn't matter how capable Murong Lian is; he can't command three major armies at once. No general can hold down three separate formations."

"But you're awake now, aren't you?" Mengze hesitated. "You can command the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion, Lian-ge will lead his usual troop of cultivators, and as for the Northern Frontier Army…"

She pursed her lips, eyes flashing with inscrutable emotion.

Mo Xi blinked in confusion; then, as if his heart already knew the answer, it began to race in his chest. He stared into Mengze's eyes. "What about the Northern Frontier Army?"

"I—I have some good news." Mengze seemed afraid of dealing him any further shock and lowered her voice. It was no use—her message was like a drop of water landing in roiling oil, inevitably causing a violent splatter. "Gu Mang, he…"

Lips parted slightly, Mo Xi stared fixedly at her, his voice almost inaudible. "He what?"

"He's completely recovered. His reputation has been cleared after this calamity. He returned to his position as commander of the Northern Frontier Army three days ago, and right now, he's training with his soldiers on the drill ground in preparation for tomorrow's battle."

Mo Xi froze.

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Chapter 184:
Your Elder Brother Gives You the Hero's Ribbon

HEEDLESS OF HIS WOUNDS, Mo Xi rushed to the drill ground. His conversation with Mengze echoed ceaselessly in his ears along the way—

"After Murong Chen shattered the soul-box with his life, the Demonblood Beast's power scattered, and the soul Gu Mang had used to create the box also dispersed. According to all we know, a soul dispersed should fly into the vast world of the Nine Provinces; it should be practically impossible to track down. But when we found you in the rubble of the Golden Terrace, it was hovering by your side. As if it retained some wisp of awareness, and was guarding you within the debris."

For a long time, Mo Xi was unable to speak. When he finally opened his mouth, his voice was unrecognizably hoarse. "Then…what about the other soul? The soul he forged into the key for the soul-box—hadn't Murong Lian destroyed it?"

"Lian-ge didn't destroy it; he was lying. Think about it—if Gu Mang created this key with the intention to have it destroyed, why bother with it in the first place? He could've just made the soul-box impossible to open. At that time, Murong Chen was already mad, and the situation was volatile. He didn't notice the gaps in Lian-ge's story, and neither did you nor I. Afterward, Lian-ge told me that when Gu Mang gave him the key, he had in fact not asked him to destroy it, but to find some way to annihilate the power of the Demonblood Beast. He hoped that if Lian-ge succeeded, he would open the box with the key and end the Demonblood Beast once and for all.

"General Gu has always been cautious in his dealings. He knew sealing the Demonblood Beast's power was different from destroying it… Ah, it's unfortunate Lian-ge was so suspicious of General Gu's intentions and wasn't earnest in his investigation. When he did believe General Gu later, he had no chance to continue researching. After everything General Gu sacrificed, the power of the Demonblood Beast was still released."

Murong Mengze closed her eyes and sighed. “Lian-ge hasn’t said so, but I can tell. He blames himself.”

Mo Xi’s head was ringing; he was still in poor condition. Though he hadn’t been the one to end Murong Chen, his actions had still violated the Vow of Calamity. The backlash from the oath hadn’t killed him, but his injuries were severe enough to render him unconscious for a full seven days after the battle at the Golden Terrace. Yet it seemed his mind would always be clear when Gu Mang was concerned, no matter how exhausted or debilitated he was—just as Gu Mang’s soul had hovered around Mo Xi to protect him even when it was scattered. Their enduring bond was an instinctive habit for both of them. Mo Xi was only silent for a moment before he picked out the relevant details from his memories. “It was the thumb ring,” he said.

“What?”

“The key was the thumb ring Murong Lian wore,” Mo Xi muttered. “That’s why Murong Lian gave him the ring when Zhou He wanted to destroy his mind—he knew it contained one of Gu Mang’s souls, so it would help Gu Mang hold out longer. That’s why every time Gu Mang’s dog saw Murong Lian, he acted like he was seeing Gu Mang himself; he always liked to sniff the hand with the thumb ring…”

Mo Xi’s lips trembled slightly; he found he couldn’t go on.

So this was the truth. He had always felt the path he and Gu Mang had taken was paved with too much suffering. When he had heard Murong Lian say in the throne room that one of Gu Mang’s mortal souls had already been destroyed at his hands, Mo Xi had felt he might break down then and there. But although he understood Gu Mang would never recover, he had still given everything to stop Murong Chen from shattering the soul-box. Beyond wanting to protect Chonghua, he had selfishly hoped there might be some method of retaining at least that one mortal soul within the box. Even if Gu Mang would never be whole, it was better than nothing.

He had struggled until he bled and bled again. Everything he’d experienced over the past three decades had taught him that asking for wholeness was too much. He would be content with shattered fragments. He was willing to spend the rest of his life piecing those shards back together, and would be satisfied with completion of this sort. But this time

—for the first time—it was as if the heavens had witnessed his suffering and returned him something whole: two mortal souls; Gu Mang's two mortal souls were still here. He had them back, and he was fully recovered.

Mo Xi walked faster and faster on the road to the drill ground. By the time he reached the field and saw that figure standing amid thousands, his vision was blurred with tears.

Very rarely did Mo Xi cry from sadness, but right now, he was happy. The general of the Northern Frontier Army had finally returned. His Gu Mang-gege, that unbroken, brilliantly smiling, invincible General Gu who brought hope to countless men, had finally returned.

Mo Xi had never dared ask for anything extravagant. Yet fate had finally taken pity on him, and bestowed upon him the most beautiful dream of his life. No—it wasn't a dream. It was real. Those remnants of filth had been washed away. Gu Mang was no longer a traitor, a villain, or a spy. He was a general who could stand tall in the daylight, beneath the scarlet army flags whipping above him in the wind, and gaze down from the command platform with his hands behind his back, watching the drill ground full of armor, bright in the sun.

His Gu-shixiong had been through so many trials and tribulations, his hands and feet scraped raw. He'd endured no end of suffering and humiliation, experienced untold sorrow and separation, and finally returned to the place he most belonged—standing before his troops as the finest general of Chonghua.

Some low-level cultivators saw Mo Xi standing at the edge of the drill ground and called out. "Ah, it's General Mo!"

"General Mo is here…"

"Xihe-jun is here!"

That movement was like wind over a lake's surface, spreading all the way to the command platform. Gu Mang's head was turned, speaking to Murong Lian; upon noticing this ripple, he squinted toward its source, the noon sun and strong wind at his back.

Across the sea of dark helms and glinting weapons, he saw Mo Xi.

Gu Mang looked startled for a moment, and then a smile bloomed across his face. Those black irises were gone forever, but his blue eyes were every bit as bright as when he'd served in the cavalry with Mo Xi in their youth. He raised a hand and waved energetically at Mo Xi beneath the billowing flags of the Northern Frontier Army.

"General Mo!" he shouted, with the playfulness of a child and the gentleness of an elder brother. "Get up here! You've slept so long—you're the last to arrive!"

The Northern Frontier Army that Mo Xi had disciplined for so many years, those soldiers who seemed to have solemnity carved upon their bones, couldn't help bursting into laughter. Mo Xi suddenly realized that the troops hadn't changed at all. Under his command they had long been obedient, but none of this solemnity was rightly theirs. The boldness and mirth given to them by their General Gu was the true soul of the Northern Frontier Army.

Mo Xi blinked back the tears of happiness that threatened to slip out. He looked up; it wouldn't do to let the soldiers see him make a fool of himself. But as he walked to Gu Mang on the command platform, through the tide of soldiers that had parted to let him pass, he knew his tears were falling.

He could never be solemn or cold anymore. He would feel hurt, sadness, and happiness; he would have all of the emotions belonging to a person of flesh and blood. On this day, the ice and snow melted away. All his happiness and sorrow remained hidden no longer; all of it was on display before his soldiers. Yet to his surprise, not a single person laughed at him. Those exuberant smiles were gradually brought in check; the men gazed intently at him, as if the barrier that had stood between them for years had shattered.

A man with no fear of death shouted, "Xihe-jun, welcome home!"

The crowd was silent. Mo Xi made no sound.

Then Gu Mang smiled and spoke from the high terrace: "General Mo, welcome home."

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Yes, this was home. It didn’t need to be some building or tower, some pavilion or courtyard; rather, it was being together with these people they protected, and who protected them in turn. It turned out they’d had a home from the day they first enlisted. General Gu, General Mo, Murong Lian—who wore an expression of complete impatience but had absolutely no plans to leave—

They had all come home.

Preparations for the battle proceeded smoothly. *How could they go otherwise*, Mo Xi thought as he looked at Gu Mang standing beside him. Where there was Gu Mang, there was heat and light; General Gu could re-kindle a bonfire that had gone out.

Everyone knew they were about to face a terrible catastrophe. Their opponents were the evil Demonblood Beast Preceptor Chen had sealed with his own life centuries ago, and that terrifying, devilish guoshi, whose true identity no one knew. But Gu Mang seemed unaffected by this. Before his comrades, he appeared to have complete confidence in their victory. He possessed an extraordinary natural charisma that inspired those around him. His soldiers felt they could conquer any challenge and win any battle, so long as he was present.

When the war council ended and the crowd dispersed, Gu Mang blinked at Mo Xi. Under the dimming sky, his eyes looked almost black. “Sorry I couldn’t be by your side when you woke up.”

“No,” Mo Xi replied. “You were always with me.” Pausing, he added, “Do you remember what happened at the Golden Terrace? That soul of yours.”

Gu Mang smiled. It had been too long since Mo Xi had seen this smile—lively and bright, with a sharp little canine peeking out between his rosy lips.

“…Hello?” A hand appeared between them and waved. “Excuse me, do you two think I’m dead?”

Turning, Gu Mang was met with Murong Lian’s infuriating visage.

This man was suspicious, ruthless, underhanded, and egotistical by nature. Even now, when he realized how many mistakes he'd made, he couldn't give up his brash and arrogant attitude, much like how he couldn't quit the ephemera he'd learned to smoke out of necessity.

Gu Mang grinned. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to tell you something." Murong Lian's lordly attitude was the same as ever, but his shifting peach-blossom eyes exposed his unease.

"What is it?"

Murong Lian cleared his throat. "This is for you."

He passed Gu Mang a blue and gold merit ribbon with exquisite embroidery. It was the one Murong Xuan had left behind. Murong Lian spoke, his expression stiff: "Wangshu Manor will always be mine, and I'll always be the head of the family. But regarding this…after giving it some thought, maybe—maybe, mind you—you might be better suited to wearing it than me."

Gu Mang gazed down at the ribbon. In the tawny gold of the late afternoon sun, it was impossible to clearly make out his expression. When he looked up again, Murong Lian had no chance to glimpse his face before Gu Mang suddenly reached out and pulled him into a hug.

"What…the hell." Murong Lian's arms were frozen awkwardly in the air, his pipe raised and disdain written all over his face. He looked like a wooden puppet with broken joints forced into a ridiculous pose. After a moment, he said gracelessly, "Don't expect me to personally tie it around your head."

He was answered by Gu Mang's loud laughter. "Life's too short to hold a grudge—if you tie it for me, I won't make a fuss about all the ways you screwed me over in the past."

Murong Lian shoved him. "That's because you've been crafty and cunning since you were little—I couldn't trust you at all!" he fumed. "I should be the one making demands—how's this, if you keep calling me your lord, I'll deign to look out for you."

Gu Mang rubbed the back of his neck. His slave collar had been removed; both the one from Wangshu Manor years ago and the one from

Xihe Manor, which came later, were gone.

Batting his eyelashes, Gu Mang grinned at Murong Lian. “Lian-di.”

In a fit of pique, Murong Lian flung the blue and gold merit ribbon at Gu Mang’s face. With a sweep of his sleeves, he turned on his heel and stalked off, muttering under his breath.

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Chapter 185:
Battle Begins

AFTER NIGHTFALL, Gu Mang and Mo Xi walked side by side through the ruined interior of the imperial palace of Chonghua. The great sum of Murong Chen's nefarious deeds over the past few years had been revealed to the people, like a lavish robe flipped over to expose the crawling lice beneath, too loathsome to bear close examination. His madness had driven the capital into darkness and chaos. The halls they walked through were cluttered with shards of stone and brick, broken wood and shattered tile. As the two of them picked their way down the main walkway, Mo Xi asked, "After the soul-box shattered, who merged your two mortal souls? Murong Lian?"

Gu Mang shook his head. "Su Yurou. Jiang Fuli's wife."

"So it was her…"

"Mn. But she's had a lot on her mind the past few days. Medicine Master Jiang's whereabouts are still unknown."

"One would have thought he'd have rushed back to Chonghua no matter how far he had traveled, given how severe this upheaval has been."

"Yes, but unfortunately he hasn't." Gu Mang sighed. "Otherwise, we'd have the demonic qi in the city a bit more under control. Right now, Su Yurou's handling it alone, but her healing skills are no match for Jiang Fuli's."

After a moment's thought, Mo Xi said, "Mengze did say there was that reclusive healer in Lin'an who knows Rebirth. Maybe he could—"

"There's no time for that now." Gu Mang spoke lightly, as if he wasn't interested in the reclusive healer Mengze had mentioned in the slightest. Mo Xi sensed his indifference was about more than the imminent appearance of the Demonblood Beast. Rather, he had no faith in the legend Mengze described at all. Mo Xi was certain that, even if there was time, nothing could induce Gu Mang to seek out Mengze's reclusive cultivator.

"Is it because you feel what Mengze said might not be reliable?"

Gu Mang paused, then smiled. “That’s not what I said.” Upon seeing Mo Xi about to ask another question, he pointed to a pile of wreckage in the throne room. “Ah, look over there.”

He grabbed Mo Xi’s arm and dragged him over. It was those golden incense-burner beasts Murong Lian had custom-made to curry favor with Murong Chen. The little golden braziers lay in the ruins, still doing their best to shout, “Your Imperial Majesty’s fortune floods the heavens,” and “Your Imperial Majesty’s glory fills the realm.”

Listening to them, Gu Mang let out a long, mournful sigh. “In the end, Murong Chen wanted too much.”

“I’m not sure who could be Chonghua’s emperor when we defeat the Liao Kingdom,” said Mo Xi.

“Lian-di is out of the running for sure—he said himself that his health is poor, and the ephemera’s reduced him to an invalid. After everything’s over, he plans to go to the fiefdom of Linyi to convalesce. But you can’t rush things like this—everyone has their own fate, and every nation has its own fortune. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it; there’s no need to worry.” He smiled. “But you just said *when* we defeat the Liao Kingdom—you’re so certain we can win?”

Mo Xi looked up, his gaze calm and gentle. “With you, of course we can win.”

Gu Mang’s eyes flashed with light, and he knocked on Mo Xi’s chest. “Ha ha, thanks for believing in me. Well, I think I can win too. No one knows the Demonblood Beast better than me, so you all have to listen to my orders in the battle tomorrow. This time, I’m the commander.”

He looked so smug Mo Xi couldn’t resist poking him in the forehead. “You’ll always be my commander.”

Gu Mang smiled in that bold way of his, yet seemed a little bashful. After a moment, he said, “On that note, I feel like Su Yurou… She’s a bit odd.”

“How so?”

“Back when the sword demon Li Qingqian was making trouble, he said the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom went insane when he heard the

peerless beauty Su Yurou had married a man in Chonghua. He found more than a hundred women who resembled Su Yurou and sacrificed them all to that mountain. He said something like…what's so special about Su Yurou; he could have as many beauties like her as he wanted."

Mo Xi nodded. "Exactly so. Li Qingqian's companion Miss Hong Shao met her end because of their resemblance."

"Mn." Gu Mang stroked his chin. "But Mo Xi, don't you think there's a problem with this story?"

"What?"

"Think about it—how would any normal woman react if her former lover stormed his way to the gates of her country?"

Mo Xi considered. "She might find a way to send word and beg for leniency."

"What else?"

"She'd become nervous, and worry about how to face him."

"You're right," Gu Mang said. "But Madam Su hasn't shown any sign of unease. It's like she cares not one whit what the Liao guoshi is doing. She only sends more people to look for Medicine Master Jiang."

"Perhaps she and the Liao guoshi are a thing of the past. Now that she's Jiang Fuli's wife, it's reasonable for her to care more for Jiang Fuli's safety."

Gu Mang waggled a finger at him. "Incorrect." He pinched Mo Xi's cheek with a grin. "Look at you—your moral standards are too high. You always assess people's feelings according to social ethics. Yes, Su Yurou is Jiang Fuli's wife, and I don't think she would betray Jiang Fuli; that's social ethics. But if Su Yurou's involvement with the guoshi was as deep as Li Qingqian claimed, regardless of whether she's someone else's wife or mother, how could she ignore him when they met again as enemies? But Su Yurou doesn't care," Gu Mang continued. "I've watched her over the last few days. It seems she only feels two things toward the guoshi: fear and disgust." Gu Mang shook his head. "That's not the attitude anyone would have toward a past lover."

Looking at him, so serious, Mo Xi felt a touch of exasperation. “And how would you know how the lady feels?”

“Honestly, it’s nothing to do with men or women; it’s pure human nature.” Gu Mang paused. “Ah, think of it like this. When you thought I defected, before the battle at Dongting Lake, when you knew you were about to see me after I committed treason—how did you feel?”

Mo Xi blinked.

“It was definitely more than fear or disgust, right?”

Of course. Even now, Mo Xi could recall it with searing clarity: profound pain and profound hope, Gu Mang’s shadow dogging his days and haunting his nights. As if he was drowning in past tenderness, blinded by the unknown that lay before him. Mo Xi lowered his lashes and sighed. “I see what you mean.”

“So there’s something off about Madam Su.”

“Mn.”

“I have three guesses,” said Gu Mang. “The first: Madam Su knows some secrets about the Liao guoshi that outsiders don’t. The second: Madam Su never reciprocated his affections at all, and the guoshi drove himself crazy all on his own.”

“And the third?”

“The third…” Gu Mang said. “Perhaps Li Qingqian misunderstood the guoshi’s motives. His ideas about the guoshi and Madam Su were wrong from the beginning.”

Mo Xi widened his eyes.

Gu Mang tapped his chin. “To be honest, I’m leaning toward the third possibility. When we dealt with Li Qingqian, the sword demon dispersed after he saw Su Yurou’s face and she whispered something to him. I think the third is most likely. Su Yurou probably dispelled the assumption behind Li Qingqian’s obsession with her, which was what turned him into a sword demon in the first place. That’s why he thought it was all too ridiculous and dispersed into ashes the instant his willpower dissolved. How else could she break his mind with just her face and a few words?”

Mo Xi thought it over and nodded. “It makes sense.”

Any further elaboration was cut off by a distant rumble of thunder. They both turned on reflex.

A massive vortex of storm clouds had gathered overhead, its dark center shot through with forking lightning. A hole seemed to have been torn open in the sky; pale light spilled down like heaven's blood onto the Liao army's stationed troops. In that white light bright enough to illuminate the deepest abyss, countless dark specks floated up from the Liao army's encampment and rose toward the rift in the heavens.

Performing a quick sight-enhancing spell, Gu Mang took a closer look. When he saw what those dark specks were, his face turned an unpleasant shade of green.

"Fuck. That's the Demonblood Beast's rebirth ceremony." Gu Mang's lips moved, but his eyes never left those black dots. Voice low, he said, "Those are living sacrifices floating up—they're Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts the Liao Kingdom captured!"

"What?!" Mo Xi exclaimed in disbelief.

The so-called Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts were a tribe bearing ancient demon blood. In the wake of the long-ago battle between gods and demons, however, the gates to the demon realm had been forever closed to the mortal world. This demon tribe abandoned in the human realm could no longer reach the source of the demonic qi that nourished them; slowly, their spiritual cores withered, and their magic was lost. They became identical to—or even weaker than—regular humans. The only trait they retained from the demon tribe was their suitability for use as cultivation vessels.

"The Demonblood Beast is an evil creature refined using a method found in the fragmented records of the ancient demon tribe. It requires large amounts of demonic blood," Gu Mang explained. "When I was in the Liao Kingdom, I read the scrolls on the Demonblood Beast very carefully. According to the stories, the demonic tribe must funnel their own spiritual qi into the beast. If mortals want to refine it themselves, they'd have to use sacrifices that carry the blood of the demon tribe—the most effective of these are Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts."

"Which is to say…the Demonblood Beast is raised on living people of this bloodline?" asked Mo Xi.

“Pretty much,” Gu Mang said. “More than a hundred thousand Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts are needed to refine one Demonblood Beast. Wasn’t Li Qingqian’s village destroyed because Liao soldiers were capturing Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts? I’d say they’ve been planning this for a long time.”

Those shadowy blue irises were filled with the light of the storm. “Looks like the Liao Kingdom wants a reckoning with us before daybreak. It won’t wait till tomorrow.” As he spoke, he tied the blue and gold silk ribbon Murong Lian had given to him over his forehead. A few wisps of hair came loose, falling over the merit ribbon. “We’re off to lead the troops!”

A faint smile hooked the corners of his mouth. Perhaps it was Mo Xi’s imagination that, in the glow of the Demonblood Beast’s light, Gu Mang’s blue eyes seemed a bit wet. A shadow of foreboding crept into Mo Xi’s heart. He found himself murmuring, “Gu Mang…”

He thought Gu Mang wouldn’t hear this low call—or that even if he did, Gu Mang might not respond. There, he was wrong.

Gu Mang turned, his blue eyes shining with the fires of the battlefield in the distance. He gazed at Mo Xi in silence. Then he reached out to loop his arms around Mo Xi’s shoulders, gathering him into a bruising embrace —

Contained within the circle of those arms were too many things to name: love, intimacy, comfort, encouragement…all the brilliant faith Gu Mang had afforded Mo Xi in the past. The press of their bodies felt so natural, as if those miserable and hopeless years of spying and treachery had never come between them.

When Gu Mang drew back, his handsome face was flashing with a sharp, fiery light. “After this battle, you need to take your Gu Mang-gege out for a drink. I require the best pear-blossom white, or I’ll be mightily displeased.”

Before Mo Xi could get a clear look at his face, he had turned away. Pulling Mo Xi along, he moved toward the command platform with a swiftness that brooked no argument.

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Chapter 186:
Gu Mang and the Demonblood Beast

THOUGH THEIR GENERALS had estimated the final battle would come the next day, everyone knew it was a guess; the war between Chonghua and Liao was like a firecracker whose fuse had been lit, ready to detonate at any moment. No one was thus surprised when Gu Mang called an urgent assembly. Many soldiers had run to the drill ground unbidden the instant that ghoulish light had appeared. They knew they'd have no sleep tonight; they'd meet Liao in their first major battle before dawn. If they could kill the Demonblood Beast as it emerged, the Liao army would retreat on its own. But if they couldn't…

"Of course we can."

So Gu Mang, their commander, had said. He hadn't said it like an order, but a promise. Gu Mang wasn't particularly tall or broad, and the suffering he'd endured had left him alarmingly thin. But the figure he cut, with the scarlet plume of his helmet billowing in the wind, was every bit as galvanizing as it had been in days of yore. When he spoke to the soldiers, his voice rang.

"Once, I stood right here and put my life on the line with my brothers through thirty-nine battles, big and small. This is the fortieth one. Before every battle, I made you the same promise. I said, *I will take you home*. I kept this promise thirty-eight times. At Phoenix Cry Mountain, I broke my word. I failed to keep my promise; I did not succeed. I left seventy thousand men behind at that battle, and getting gravestones for them took me fucking ages haggling with His Imperial Majesty."

Gu Mang spoke with his hands behind his back, his voice steady. He was doing his best to don his old ease and charisma before the troops. But as Mo Xi and Murong Lian stood beside him, both could see that his eyes glimmered with tears.

"I made good on my promise thirty-eight times." Gu Mang's eyes were too bright as he said, "And I broke it once. This is the fortieth time I'm

making it. If you trust me, heed my call and follow me—let's go defeat that newborn whelp once and for all. And then—I'll take you home!"

I'll take you home. Along with those seventy thousand dead souls. Along with a peace that will last through the ages. As long as you're willing to believe in me again, I, Gu Mang, will deliver on my promise, whether in life or in death. I will make myself worthy of being named your General Gu.

I'll take you home.

The soldiers spread out beneath the platform didn't speak. Their faces were upturned, gazing solemnly at their master of the northern frontier, their warrior of the empire, their scarred and wounded commander.

Yet in the next moment, their armor flashed with light and their weapons thudded into the ground. A fierce roar seemed to shake loose from the bowels of the earth itself, rushing into the world from thousands of chests—

"Together in life or death!"

It echoed like a vast wave, spreading across the Nine Provinces.

"Together in life or death…"

In Mo Xi's younger days, he'd always thought a nation had to have a ruler—that was what he'd been taught since he was little. Yet Chonghua had lost Murong Chen, and it was united like never before. Their recent calamity was like a dagger cutting away the nation's rotten flesh—there was pain, yes, but it had also awakened those who had been stubbornly asleep, allowing them to take a good look at the hearts of those around them who didn't know the difference between good and evil.

The great army set out as one, their armor glittering like dense scales. Swords and spiritual horses bore their masters away, one after another. The cultivators were like stars streaming together to form the Milky Way: a great, gleaming river that grew broader as their numbers swelled, charging into the sky.

Murong Lian hummed inquisitively. "What's happening down there?"

High in the air, Gu Mang looked downward and saw the gates of Chonghua City wide open. Beneath their army aloft on their swords,

countless bamboo warriors and strange beasts were streaming over the ground, trailing the main forces as they stormed toward the final battlefield—at their head was none other than Yue Chenqing.

He was followed by more cultivators, nobles, and even civilian residents of the city… They poured from the capital gates under their own command, charging toward the Liao Kingdom's encampment.

Shocked, Gu Mang gazed at this strange, unprecedented sight. This stream of people flowed forth without cease, with no distinction between rich or poor, noble or common. The people came together, rushing toward the enemy.

"I was wrong," Gu Mang murmured.

"What?" said Murong Lian.

"This time, they don't need me to bring them home," Gu Mang said, the rims of his eyes slightly red. "This is our home."

He looked toward the banks of the Fushui River in the middle distance. There stood the largest barrier protecting Chonghua's capital—the imperial barrier. Behind that translucent wall, tens of thousands of the Liao Kingdom's demonic cultivators waited, as well as the evil Demonblood Beast on the verge of being reborn.

Gu Mang brought his fingertips together and urged his sword on faster, rushing toward the lake where they would make their final stand.

In the dark, the Liao Kingdom's resurrection array shone more and more clearly. It was absorbing the sacrificed lives on the other side of the great Fushui River, emitting a light that grew brighter as they watched. A massive ghostly silhouette had risen in the middle of the formation, as lofty as any mountain peak: the form of the Demonblood Beast as it was resurrected.

Gu Mang hovered at the edge of the imperial barrier, his robes fluttering as he gazed at the fledgling form of this massive beast. His temples throbbed. That vision of Chen Tang from centuries ago flashed before his eyes once more. Hundreds of years ago, Chen Tang had fought a life-or-death battle, just like today. Then, as now, they had met in battle near the water, on a riverbank.

Chen Tang’s sharp brows were drawn low as he stared coldly at Hua Po’an. “Your evil cannot be borne. Why should I spare you?”

The agony ripping through Gu Mang’s head forced him to close his eyes. This vision differed from the ones he’d had before. Now that he had his memories and his mind, he understood why he saw visions of Chen Tang from centuries in the past.

Eight years ago, he had entered the Liao Kingdom under orders from his emperor and uncovered its black magic secrets, in particular those related to the Demonblood Beast. He had spent a frightfully long time gaining the trust of the Demonblood Beast’s highest-ranked overseer and built a close friendship with him.

During that time, Gu Mang had gone often to look at what remained of the Demonblood Beast’s vital spirit. Although back then the Demonblood Beast was only a cloud of damaged silvery fog without its souls, power, or memories, Gu Mang had felt its potent malevolent energy.

“Heh, Gu-xiong, take a look. We’ve spent years thinking up ways to wake the beast up again. Once it recovers, all of the Nine Provinces will fall before our Great Liao!”

Gu Mang had stared at that silvery fog and smiled without batting an eye. “Oh, yes.”

The overseer hadn’t been exaggerating. The Demonblood Beast returned to life would be a catastrophe. Even if the twenty-seven nations of the cultivation realm banded together to resist it, the casualties would be unimaginable.

At the time, Gu Mang hadn’t yet discovered his own emperor’s true intent. But he knew that a terrifying killing weapon like the Demonblood Beast would be a terrible danger no matter which country or person possessed it. Although he might help his emperor strategize means of seizing the Demonblood Beast, he wouldn’t hand over that kind of power to Murong Chen so easily no matter how much he trusted him.

The first time Gu Mang saw the Demonblood Beast’s silvery mist rise in the Liao Kingdom’s secret chamber, he’d already wondered if there was a method to guarantee the outcome he wanted. If there came a day when the Demonblood Beast was reborn—whether resurrected by the Liao

Kingdom and loyal to Liao, or recovered by Chonghua and allegiant to Chonghua—he wished to be able to destroy it with the least possible sacrifice. That would be the safest way, for everyone.

In the days and nights that followed, Gu Mang thought through many possible hypotheticals, but in the end, he could see only one path forward: the Heart-Resonance technique.

It wasn't a particularly complex or extraordinary magic. In fact, his goal when he'd first developed this technique was childishly naive. He'd once had an excessively beautiful dream. Despite knowing how vast and uncertain his future was, he'd still hoped to share a life with his little shidi. It would be just as they used to talk about, half in jest: they'd have a home together, with a couple cats or dogs, and plant a peach tree in the courtyard. They'd shed their armor and return to the fields together, grow old together, die together. And even though he knew it was impossible, Gu Mang couldn't stop himself from secretly creating this Heart-Resonance technique. Using this magic, he could share his mind with Mo Xi. As long as they both were willing, they could see all sorts of the things that had happened in each other's past. They could share each other's memories, feelings, wishes…their whole lives.

It was a spell that required limitless trust and intimacy, absurdly idealistic. Gu Mang had never thought he'd actually make use of it. He had only been playing, bleeding off some of his own beautiful reveries.

But back then, as he stood before the Demonblood Beast's inchoate form, he understood. His destiny had already been written. The first and last use of the Heart-Resonance technique wouldn't be one of companionship, but of farewell. While the Demonblood Beast was weak, he took the chance to stealthily cast this spell onto its spiritual form.

The instant he'd activated the technique, he'd felt darkness rush into his bloodstream like the tide. The black magic spells carved upon his bones were roused by the Demonblood Beast, and demonic qi surged into his body. This was the Demonblood Beast's filthy life. The evil creature's soul, forged from the lives of countless sacrifices—Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts and commoners alike—lived within him.

At that moment, he'd seemed to become one with it. He saw how Hua Po'an refined the beast hundreds of years ago, using a ravine as the

crucible, heavenly lightning as the flame, and tens of thousands of living people as the raw matter. At last, he succeeded in creating this fiendish and wicked creature.

Its howls rent the sky. He was it, and it was he.

Through the Demonblood Beast's eyes, Gu Mang saw the past. He saw Hua Po'an standing before the Demon-Refining Peak, saw that ghoulish face from hundreds of years ago.

"The ruler of Chonghua reduced me to a slave while elevating his Murong Clan as nobles—how ridiculous!" Hua Po'an had once whispered to the fledgling form of the Demonblood Beast, pouring all of his hatred into it. "For as long as I can remember, I've always wondered this. Why was I a lowborn servant, while others were born into wealth? Those nasty old men told me that this was my destiny, that my life was fated to be like this. But is that true? I worked harder than those nobles; I have more innate talent than any of them—what kind of destiny is this? Is this not strange?"

Hua Po'an's features twisted and warped. Such an evil beast could only have been born from such virulent hate. "Jingchen, did you know… when I was a slave, I read many books in Chonghua's cultivation academy. I dug deep down to the roots of this nation, little by little. I wanted to know why those named Murong were nobles while we, beneath them, were servants… Yet when I found my answer, I couldn't bear it.

"Shall I tell you? Long, long ago, Chonghua was founded by two brothers, both generals. Side by side, they led their soldiers and conquered a vast territory to create this nation. They reduced the rebellious denizens of the countries they conquered to slaves and stripped them of their right to cultivate so that they could never take up arms and overthrow the new nation they'd built.

"But the killing never came to an end; one mountain wasn't enough for two tigers. Those brothers had faced death together—yet after the temporary peace bought by their conquest, they reached a stalemate. Who would rule? After turning their blades on each other, tricking each other, deceiving each other, the elder brother lost. His younger brother beheaded every single one of the defeated general's female family members and decreed that any descendants of his line would be the lowest of slaves. Their spiritual cores were destroyed, and they were branded so they could

never free themselves. I am a descendant of that branch of the founding family—how dissatisfying, no?”

He burst into laughter. “The Murong Clan’s blood also runs through my veins. But because of one man’s failure, one man’s selfishness, and two men’s conflict, I was born in this state, into a lowly life where I don’t even know my own surname,” Hua Po’an said bitterly. “Tell me, were you in my place, could you make peace with this?”

The Demonblood Beast Jingchen shot up a beam of fiery light from the crucible, as if in answer to his question. Hua Po’an’s eyes shone brighter. The world entire seemed to burn to ashes in those mad eyes.

“I’ve never been content with this kind of life. Even losing control of my spiritual core in the beginning was part of my plan. I was sure that ridiculous man Chen Tang was soft-hearted; I knew he couldn’t bring himself to kill me. He begged the emperor for leniency on my behalf and made an exception for me to practice cultivation, all because I was sweet and pitiable.”

The firelight from the Demon-Refining Peak licked up like the tongues of resentful ghosts, dancing madly as they shot out of hell. It lit Hua Po’an’s face, revealing greed, hatred, ambition… Gu Mang saw the Demonblood Beast’s first glimpse of the human world, the image Hua Po’an immersed the creature in.

“Jingchen, I created you to help me reclaim Chonghua. I too can be king of this nation!”

The Demonblood Beast was an evil creature forged from hatred and greed. The flesh of dead men had become its flesh, and Hua Po’an’s mad ambition had become its ambition. When its evil heart resonated with Gu Mang’s, that terrifying bloodthirstiness was nearly enough to drag Gu Mang with it into hell.

Gu Mang had felt deep disgust, but he didn’t sever the connection. All so he could…

The bugle sounded and the drums of war thundered. Gu Mang turned to see the vast and majestic troops of Chonghua, his brothers and comrades, those men with whom he’d traversed life and death, those souls he’d promised to bring home, those soldiers who called him General Gu.

Sparks swirled up from the battlefield about to go up in the flames of war. His heart pounded, holding a secret known to no one else. Of course he could win; of course he'd succeed. Who in the world knew the Demonblood Beast better than he did? Even Hua Po'an himself was merely its master. He hadn't shared his soul with it, merged his life with it.

"Defense cultivators, reinforce the imperial barrier on both sides. Healers' squadrons should be the eye of the formation. Winged Cavalry, disrupt the Liao troop formations on the north side. Northern Frontier Army, with me."

"Yes, sir!"

Gu Mang narrowed his eyes, looking down at the Liao encampment, their blades shining in the moonlight. Across the great surging river, across a barrier that stretched from the heavens down to the earth, the armies of Chonghua and Liao stood opposed. The Liao Kingdom had been given plenty of time to prepare for Chonghua's attack, and assembled swiftly. Gu Mang looked out over the armor that shimmered like fish scales behind the barrier and knew the slaughter would begin as soon as he led his soldiers through this screen.

He took a deep breath. Bathed in the pristine light of the moon, he commanded sharply, "We advance through the barrier!"

"Yes, sir!"

On his command, the cultivators of Chonghua swooped down like a great falcon. The moment they crossed the barrier, black magic spells from the enemy cultivators shot toward them like a sky full of bristling arrows. Countless black magic beasts were released from their keepers' hands: black-winged corpse hounds and demonic falcons with venomous beaks, barreling madly toward the cultivators of Chonghua like a chaotic swarm of poison darts.

On the ground below, the bamboo warrior army led by Yue Chenqing rolled forward like a herd of hardy grassland horses. They forded the surging Fushui River that protected the city and streamed toward the Liao encampment on the opposite shore.

Chonghua's vanguard was like a sharp knife hurled toward the Liao army's gleaming shield, the collision sending sparks flying as the dagger's

point stabbed at the army's core. A pike struck from behind this shield—the counterstrike from the Liao Kingdom's offensive cultivators. Roars from a thousand throats shook the skies, and fire and blood streaked the air.

"Attack!"

The sky lit up with fireworks like countless shooting stars falling to earth. The battle was monstrous, but beneath the velvet curtain of night, it created a majestic, dazzling spectacle. The blood of dead soldiers dyed the banks of the Fushui River a blushing pink. Gu Mang felled a demonic bird soaring toward him with a strike of his dagger, then cried, "Don't get bogged down at the front! Follow me to the Demonblood Beast's forging grounds!"

Beside the site where the Demonblood Beast had been created was an immense cage for holding sacrifices, filled to bursting with the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts the Liao Kingdom had seized and bred over decades. Liao soldiers pushed them into the center of the demon-refining furnace, one after another. These humans were treated like ore for smelting swords, like pieces of marble or any raw material. They were made to jump into the furnace, the source of energy for the Demonblood Beast's resurrection.

"Mom…" one prisoner whimpered.

"I don't want to die… I don't want to die…"

These human sacrifices wailed in grief as they went to their deaths, but the people of Liao felt not the slightest twinge of conscience at their piteous begging. They had seen the Demonblood Beast's fledgling silhouette and could already sense the all-powerful evil beast it would become. Yelling, pushing, and prodding, they sent those living humans with a few drops of ancient demon blood into the churning furnace.

A woman with exquisite features saw that it was soon to be her turn, and fat tears rolled down her lovely cheeks. Her tear tracks glimmered golden—the tell-tale sign of a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast. "Spare me!" She grabbed a Liao cultivator in despair. "I'm with child, I want my babe to live… Please… I'm begging you…"

But the only answer she received was the Liao cultivator's raucous laughter. "Even better! Pregnant ones have stronger demonic qi!"

The woman's eyes brimmed with tears. As her desperation reached its peak, a beam of blue light shot down from the sky. A magnificent barrier sprang up from the ground, enclosing the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts behind it. Astonished and overjoyed, the woman looked up to see a group of Chonghua's cultivators swoop in on their swords. The commander at their head wore silver armor and black boots, his eyes a gleaming blue, the red plumes on his helmet fluttering in the wind. That blue and gold ribbon that represented the blood of heroes was tied neatly beneath his whipping bangs.

It was Gu Mang, son of the Wangshu line and general of the Northern Frontier Army. At his side was Xihe-jun, Mo Xi, in gold-trimmed black robes that billowed in the wind, as well as Wangshu-jun, Murong Lian, wearing sapphire trimmed in gold and an expression of careless disdain.

Murong Lian clucked his tongue. "Using living people to make a demon beast—disgusting. They're even more despicable than me; I'll admit I'm impressed."

While he spoke, Mo Xi summoned Shuairan. The soaring snake whip cracked through the air, winding itself securely around the black magic cage trapping these living sacrifices and shattering it. Lowering his black eyes, he said to those shocked and suspicious sacrifices: "Run."

The sacrifices froze for several moments before they realized what had happened. Like a scattered school of fish, they began to rush about in all directions. Some brought their hands together and kowtowed to the heavens, bawling. Mo Xi commanded a defense squadron to protect others as they fled toward safety. For a time, all they heard were the sobs of the freed prisoners as they cried, "Thank you… Thank you, esteemed cultivators…"

The pregnant woman bowed to them again and again. Only when a defense cultivator of Chonghua urged her to run did she take one last tearful glance back before turning to leave. Yet just as Gu Mang raised a hand to put an end to this Liao squadron in one swift strike, a shrill, keening melody split the air.

Gu Mang was the quickest to react. His head snapped up. "Fengbo?!"

A transparent figure came soaring toward them out of the distance. He was mounted on a sword, high in midair. As he drew closer, they could see he wore white robes, his lapels hanging carelessly open, holding a

polished copper holy weapon with a fluttering white ribbon. He looked up; his face was achingly handsome, with glistening black eyes and a rakish smile.

Even Mo Xi and Murong Lian were stunned speechless. “Gu Mang?”

The ghostly figure standing on the sword was indeed Gu Mang. A Gu Mang who was young and bold and formidable, before he had offered himself up for black magic tempering.

“Wh-what’s happening here?” exclaimed Murong Lian.

After the shock had passed, Mo Xi realized what they were seeing. His eyes reddened as he stared fixedly at this specter from the past. “The nine-eyed qin…” he rasped.

“What?”

“The Liao guoshi’s nine-eyed qin,” Mo Xi said. “There are nine eyes set within it, and each contains a cultivator’s power.” His fingertips trembled, pressing deep into his palms. His voice was heavy with the weight of his hatred, so low it was nearly inaudible. “This eye was made from the techniques of Chonghua that he stripped out of Gu Mang.”

Murong Lian flinched. He slanted a glance at Gu Mang, who seemed unaffected. The words *stripped out* tasted of blood and suffering, filled with the suggestion of being flayed open in a prison cell, of the agony of having his spiritual energy torn from his bones. Yet it was as though the words had little to do with him. Gu Mang stared at that phantom of himself that could still use the techniques of Chonghua and summon the holy weapon Fengbo, and spoke with perfect calm. “The guoshi’s handling the Demonblood Beast’s resurrection ceremony at a distance, yet it seems he can’t sit still anymore. He sent me to deal with me.”

No one said anything.

“I look pretty handsome.”

“Just average,” replied Murong Lian. “Not quite as handsome as me.”

Gu Mang chuckled. Before he could say more, he saw his phantom raise the suona, his fingertips poised over its holes. Gu Mang knew that pose too well. “Activate the sound-proofing barriers!” he shouted in worry.

The cultivators behind him did as he commanded, but not everyone was fast enough; only half of them had activated their barriers before the phantom Gu Mang began to play.

“Ah—!”

Though the sound of the suona was thin and reedy, it cut through the skies, descending upon the entirety of the assembled forces. Those who hadn’t managed to create their barrier formations screamed piteously, tumbling off their swords and plummeting to the ground. Some merely bled from every orifice, while others fell unconscious immediately.

Gu Mang swore softly; even if he’d recovered his mind, his spiritual energy was gone for good. All he could summon was the demonic dagger—deadly enough in one-on-one fights, but unable to hold a candle to the sound of Fengbo in battle.

The scene swiftly devolved into chaos. The demonic Liao Kingdom cultivators Chonghua’s forces had held at bay exploded forward in retaliation, and the tides of the battle turned. A few Liao cultivators overtook the human sacrifices that had fallen behind and recaptured the screaming Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, throwing them one by one into the spiritual energy furnace. The molten pool inside was already too dazzling to look at directly, and within the nearby resurrection array, the figure of the Demonblood Beast grew more and more distinct.

“More! Grab more!” A high-ranking Liao cultivator shouted frantically. “It’s about to be reborn! It’s about to be reborn! There’s just a bit left!”

Mo Xi reached for Tuntian, but its power was far too much. He usually only summoned the weapon a handful of times per year, and he had already used that capacity to its limit. He and Tuntian had both been depleted when he fought with Murong Chen; it wouldn’t answer his call.

It was then that Mo Xi heard another string of notes from behind him, a sound as capable of disrupting armies as Fengbo. He and Gu Mang looked back in shock.

The one playing this disruption music was Murong Lian.

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Chapter 187:
The Weapon of Warrior Soul Mountain

MURONG LIAN WAS a son of the Murong Clan; of course he had his own holy weapon instrument. He'd never liked it, and almost never called on it. But in their most desperate hour, a holy weapon huqin, its sound box covered in dragonskin, was propped against his hip.

Murong Lian met Gu Mang's gaze with a glare. "What are you looking at?! Don't you dare laugh!"

But Gu Mang wasn't laughing. He hadn't expected Murong Lian would also have a holy weapon capable of single-handedly routing three armies.

With a flourish, Murong Lian drew the bow across the fiddle's double strings. The huqin's brilliant notes met the suona's call from across the battlefield. The two sounds were like unseen dragons breaking through the water's surface, colliding in a roar of wind and thunder. This was a duel between two sons of music cultivators; neither could afford to hold anything back. Murong Lian's peach-blossom eyes were narrowed as he stared at that familiar, false Gu Mang, his pale fingers drawing the bow over silk strings. The sound grew sharper and sharper, more and more murderous, as the two forces tangled over the battlefield. Everyone's ears rang as spiritual energy roiled between the instruments.

The pair of melodies intertwined like two jiao dragons soaring through the sky; at times, Murong Lian's huqin gained the upper hand, at others, the illusory Gu Mang's Fengbo surged ahead. This sort of battle wasn't as bloody as that of blades clashing, but it was no less treacherous. Murong Lian flicked his wrist and the sound of the qin careened higher. After a few moments of falling behind, the illusory Gu Mang narrowed his eyes, his lips lifting slightly from the suona's reed.

The real Gu Mang caught the tell and shouted a warning: "Watch out!"

Murong Lian was instantly on guard, drawing the bow across both strings. Just as his melody reached a climactic high, the phantom Gu Mang closed his eyes and lifted his fingers from the instrument's holes, leaning back to play the sharpest note.

At that explosive sound, Murong Lian bent his head and choked out a mouthful of blood. Gu Mang cried out, "Murong Lian, are you all right?!"

Murong Lian licked a spot of crimson from his lips and looked up, his expression dark. "I'm fine… It won't kill me," he muttered. He leveled a sinister gaze at the phantom Gu Mang across the field. But that illusion was already beginning to fade; as they faced off, it scattered from the impact of those lingering notes, becoming a hazy fog that slowly dispersed on the wind.

A silence fell over the battlefield. Seconds after the illusory Gu Mang vanished completely, a burst of joyful shouting came from the army of Chonghua.

"It's gone! It's gone!"

"Oh my god, Wangshu-jun knew how to do *that*? Why hasn't he done it before?!"

Gu Mang approached Murong Lian to confirm he was really uninjured and let out a breath. "…Why haven't you ever shown this off?"

Murong Lian snorted, dismissing his holy weapon huqin with an impatient flick of his hand. Countenance dark, he answered, "What's there to show off? I detest music cultivation; all that singing and plucking and whining. So damn boring."

But seeing the low-level cultivators rejoice and throw themselves back into battle with Liao to take control of the demon-refining furnace, a hint of satisfaction emerged on his features.

He had no time to savor it. A soul-shaking *boom* sounded from the distance, followed by a rumbling like Mount Tai collapsing or the Yellow River flooding, as if the world itself was about to end. Everyone stilled in shock, smiles of expectant victory frozen on some low-level cultivators' faces as they craned stiff necks to look up. The red light of magma illuminated their faces and washed away their hope, replacing it with masks of terror.

“D-Demon… Demon…” The low-level cultivators stuttered. “It’s the Demonblood Beast… The Demonblood Beast!”

As the light of the demon-refining furnace brightened to a dazzling gold, roiling lava surged up from the cracks in the ground. It shattered the earth and mountains like the god Pangu breaking through the primordial chaos and burst from the ground with terrifying power. The bright energy became a shrieking whirlwind as it soared upward, pouring into that empty silhouette of the Demonblood Beast that hovered between the heavens and the earth.

Gu Mang’s skull rang with pain. He gasped.

He was it, and it was he.

He had wanted to stop it from reappearing, but at this moment, he could sense it was already too late—that a surge of wild demonic energy, bountiful enough to destroy worlds, had filled the creature’s entire body. Within its flaming shell, it was about to rise from the ashes.

“Run! Use water barriers! Mo Xi, Tuntian!”

Gu Mang’s sharp shout roused the frozen cultivators into action. Realizing a catastrophe was coming, they opened water-type barriers one by one to block it. Beneath their feet, the earth shook, fragments of rock and soil surging like resentful ghosts into the world with the gushing flames. One by one, they crashed down on the defense barriers they’d set up.

How could any one person be a match for this Demonblood Beast forged from innumerable resentful souls? Raging flames licked into the sky with the demonic creature’s rebirth, intent on sweeping the entire realm. Slowly, the cultivators lost ground against it; some with weaker spiritual energy watched as their water barriers were overpowered by the flames. Within moments, they were swallowed up and swept into the maelstrom of spiritual energy for the Demonblood Beast’s resurrection.

Mo Xi gritted his teeth and summoned all of his remaining power to shout furiously once more, “Tuntian! *Come!*”

Amid fire and blood, the massive whale soared into being. Its blue halo shone cool on the fiery sea, touching the cultivators of Chonghua and the living sacrifices with nowhere to go. Faces all across the field turned up toward Tuntian’s expansive blue light, burn marks, terror, bitterness, and

despair written over their features. They looked through the flames as the Demonblood Beast shook out its silvery-white fur, grew clawed feet the size of a palace hall, and blinked open a pair of clear blue eyes.

Its howl shook the skies.

Within this catastrophic destruction, that legendary beast of evil leapt out from the flames. It was tall enough to obscure the sky; even craning their necks, those on the ground couldn't see where its body ended; all they could hear were its ringing howls. Atop the beast's head stood the figure of a man in robes of gold-trimmed white. He cradled a qin in his arms, robes billowing around him, and stared coldly down at the realm that was soon to bend to his will. The man floated downward, coming to a stable stop on the tips of his toes.

This was the guoshi of Liao, who had been overseeing the demon beast's rebirth behind the scenes.

"Jingchen, go."

The Demonblood Beast Jingchen shrieked as it rose into the skies, bringing the seething flames with it as it flew toward the imperial barrier of Chonghua.

"It's coming!"

"Form the array! Hurry and form the array!"

The defense cultivators stationed on the Chonghua side of the Fushui River shot countless beams of spell light to buttress the imperial barrier as Jingchen slammed against the translucent wall with the force of a mountain falling into the sea.

With a *boom*, a thin crack appeared on the barrier's surface.

This ancient evil beast was too powerful. Even if the defense cultivators poured all their magic into mending the barrier, it might not hold past three strikes.

Murong Lian and Mo Xi turned to assist them, but the guoshi took this moment to raise his hands over his qin strings. He strummed once: seven eyes of the nine-eyed qin blinked open. Other than the false Gu Mang who had been scattered and the final eye at the tail of the qin, the phantoms of the eyes' masters soared out from all the others.

Besides the Xuanwu Armor and the qinggong grandmaster of Lichun, who had long been revealed, the guoshi had curated other demons and monsters, cultivators and evil spirits who resided within the qin. Those seven beams of illusory light represented seven domains of unsurpassed power obstructing Mo Xi and Murong Lian's path to providing reinforcement.

"What the hell *are* you?!" Murong Lian raged. "Shameless toady, letting others fight your battles. And what's with the mask—are you so ugly you're ashamed of being seen?!"

The guoshi paid him no mind. His robes fluttered behind those seven illusions, smiling faintly. "The mask? I've grown used to wearing it is all; I've nothing to hide. I won't keep it on forever. Once I capture Chonghua City, I'll naturally take it off." He paused, his smile now syrupy sweet. "Wangshu-jun ought to pray he lives that long."

He waved a hand, and those seven beams of light shot toward Mo Xi and Murong Lian like bright swords.

Across the field, Gu Mang reached the imperial barrier as the Demonblood Beast slammed against it with fangs bared for the third time. Cries of alarm rose as the barrier exploded into countless shards of light, crashing to the ground like hail. The Demonblood Beast shook itself and broke through the last faltering screen of spells. It sprang into the air as if ready to swallow the skies and flew toward the capital.

The cultivators on the banks of the Fushui hadn't expected the barrier to fall so quickly. For a moment, no one moved; they didn't know what to do.

Yue Chenqing, who had led the bamboo warrior army and the herd of spiritual beasts, was the first to react. "What are you staring at! Are you waiting for it to destroy the entire capital? Go stop it!"

The cultivators shuddered as they came back to their senses. But as they moved to give chase, they saw Gu Mang flying over on his sword, shouting loudly, "None of you pursue that thing!"

"General Gu!"

"You won't be able to catch it!"

“But it’s flying toward the city! Look how fast it destroyed the imperial barrier, the city—”

“It won’t destroy the city.”

Everyone paused, taken aback by his confidence.

“The Demonblood Beast just returned to life,” Gu Mang explained. “It looks powerful, but only in comparison to mortals. It’s still weak right now. After what happened with Murong Chen a few days ago, demonic qi has spread everywhere. This demonic qi will bring us certain death, but it’s rare ambrosia for the Demonblood Beast. It will not destroy the city before it absorbs all of the demonic qi in it.”

As he spoke, they saw the Demonblood Beast come to a stop above the capital of Chonghua, hovering in the air. But it was as Gu Mang said: it didn’t immediately attack, instead flying in several circles. Finally it landed on a mountainside on the outskirts of the city, opening its ferocious maw to begin absorbing demonic qi into its body.

Everyone stood terrified at the sight, but Gu Mang scoffed. “Why not? The pup can help us with the civilians who’ve been afflicted with demonic poison.” He turned to the soldiers. “It’s at its weakest when absorbing demonic qi. Watch carefully—that beast’s fatal weakness is seven feet below its heart.” He then addressed Yue Chenqing: “Yue Chenqing, come here.”

He came forward in confusion. Gu Mang straightened the young man’s slightly crooked armor and looked up at him with azure eyes. “I’m asking you to lead half of the defense troops to Warrior Soul Mountain right away.”

Yue Chenqing blinked. “Why Warrior Soul Mountain?”

Gu Mang hesitated. “There are records in the Liao Kingdom’s military histories stating that those statues of Chonghua’s rulers are actually a barrier formation. The monuments of the venerated seven stand guard over the weapon used by one of the founding generals of Chonghua.”

“What?!” Yue Chenqing exclaimed. “If that’s true, why didn’t we in Chonghua know…”

“Because that general was none other than the brother of the first emperor, reduced to a slave after losing the struggle for power—Hua Po’an’s ancestor.”

Gu Mang gazed at the distant Demonblood Beast on the mountainside. “After the general fell from grace, the first emperor erased every trace of him and his achievements. The extraordinary half-holy half-demonic weapon he wielded was sealed within the peak of Warrior Soul Mountain, guarded by the statues. But the sealing barrier needed to be reinforced once every hundred years. Instead of revealing this secret, the first emperor made a rule—whenever an emperor died or stepped down, whether or not they were worthy of the honor, the nation must erect a statue of spirit-suppressing jade on the peak of Warrior Soul Mountain.”

“Even if an emperor lived to a ripe old age, it wouldn’t be an interval of more than a hundred years,” Yue Chenqing murmured. “The statues were just an excuse to reinforce the barrier…”

“Exactly. Even so, the weapon buried there is so powerful its killing aura hasn’t dissipated even after all these centuries. Despite its protections being renewed with each generation, every night when the yin energy is at its strongest, one can hear the drums of war, sounds of slaughter, and the thunder of marching armies on Warrior Soul Mountain. They all come from the weapon vessel.”

“What kind of weapon is it?” asked Yue Chenqing.

“It’s rumored to be a longbow, created by a weapons master using both holy and demonic power. Now, remember what I say next. If the rumors from the Liao Kingdom are to be credited, you’ll only need half of the defense troops. Break the statues on the mountain peak and make a blood offering from the palms of a hundred people. The holy-demonic bow should break its own seal. You’ll need to combine everyone’s power to create an arrow of spiritual energy. When the Demonblood Beast has absorbed all of the demonic qi from the city, loose the arrow and kill it.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll lead the other half of the defense troops to cast spells from behind the Demonblood Beast to pin it down. The creature will be at its weakest after it’s glutted itself on demonic qi. If we miss this opportunity, it will become invincible.”

Gu Mang held Yue Chenqing's gaze. "Remember this," he said. "Its vital point is seven feet below its heart. You only have one chance."

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Chapter 188:
The Way of the Martyr

IT TOOK ROUGHLY an hour for the Demonblood Beast to absorb all the demonic qi in the city. As it sated itself, it enveloped its vast body in a barrier of demonic qi so no one could get close to it. Yue Chenqing led half of the defense troops toward Warrior Soul Mountain, while Gu Mang led the remaining half to stand guard on the banks of the rushing Fushui.

Dawn had come. War smoke choked the air over the battlefield, the sky whitening at its edges like the pale belly of a fish. Gu Mang turned back to look toward where the Liao guoshi was fighting Murong Lian and Mo Xi. Perhaps there was something he wished to say, or perhaps he simply wanted to take one last, longing glance.

Everything he needed to say had been said; the grudges were settled, the misunderstandings resolved. The only thing he couldn't have was the rest of his life—but how could such perfect completeness exist? There was very little Gu Mang was unwilling to part with. He had already rehearsed this ending many times in his mind while he made his plans.

The others rightly thought he was going to stop the Demonblood Beast. Only he alone knew how he was going to do it.

He summoned a golden-winged snow pegasus and straightened his merit ribbon astride its back. The tassel on his helm was crimson, the ribbon a flowing blue and gold. From atop the pegasus, he led his comrades charging toward the rear of the Demonblood Beast.

The distant sounds of soldiers marching came from the direction of Warrior Soul Mountain. Looking closer, he could see the figures of Chonghua's squadrons approaching the burial grounds on the mountain's peak. Yue Chenqing was completing the mission he'd given him, the countdown for Gu Mang's own life…

Dawn was arriving; day was about to break. When the first ray of golden splendor shot through the darkness, tearing aside night's veil, the

Demonblood Beast inhaled the last wisp of demonic qi in the capital city of Chonghua.

In the same instant, a massive *boom* sounded from the top of Warrior Soul Mountain as the seven lofty statues of previous emperors collapsed with a rumble. Gleaming red and gold light exploded from between the trees in the mountain forest as the bow of gods and demons broke through the earth. Gu Mang knew Yue Chenqing had completed the task he'd given him.

It was time for the final reckoning.

Gu Mang could taste the bloodiness of the looming battle; the Demonblood Beast scented it as well. It roared, swallowing the last of the demonic energy and absorbing the thick demonic qi into itself, pawing the ground. It reared back and sprang into the sky, baring its fangs as it soared majestically toward Warrior Soul Mountain.

At the summit, the arrow forged by ten thousand soldiers glowed as it was nocked to the bow, aimed at the Demonblood Beast's fatal point on Yue Chenqing's orders. But the Demonblood Beast moved too quickly; it was entirely impossible to aim with any precision. Yue Chenqing's expression shifted; as he watched the creature draw closer and closer, he swallowed nervously, unsure of whether to fire.

It was then that Gu Mang unsheathed his blade. Bathed in the dawn light, he cried, "Form the spell!"

He was astride a golden-winged snow pegasus, soaring hundreds of feet above the surging river Fushui. A voice-amplifying spell carried this sharp command to the hundreds of thousands of brave soldiers behind him, his voice echoing across the abandoned plains through the smoke of battle.

"Bind its body!"

"Yes, sir!"

The cultivators shouted their deafening response. Golden chains of spiritual energy shot from each of their palms, crisscrossing into an inescapable net both blindingly bright and enormously powerful. This net flew out from behind the Demonblood Beast and restrained it, binding its strong limbs and sturdy neck.

The Demonblood Beast howled in its rage. It bared its fangs, struggling in uncontrollable fury; thousands of chains snapped with each of its movements.

“Bind it again!”

Once more, countless chains of golden light shot forth, flinging themselves toward the Demonblood Beast.

Gu Mang hovered in the skies on his warhorse. The sun was cresting the horizon in the east, breaking through the darkness of the abyss. The scarlet of daybreak was more vast and vivid than the blood on the ground; Gu Mang’s handsome profile was caught in the light of the rising sun, limned in resplendent gold.

As the cultivators launched their second wave of spell-bindings, Gu Mang formed his hands into a sigil and closed his eyes. In the instant his lids shut, he saw through the Demonblood Beast Jingchen’s eyes.

He saw Yue Chenqing at the head of a neat troop formation; he saw the battered imperial capital; he saw crying children, helpless elderly, and the cultivators who never retreated. During the five years he’d spent in the Liao Kingdom, he had no choice but to harm these people. Now, as he looked at them again through the Demonblood Beast’s eyes, he saw the despair that once kept him from sound sleep, saw the hatred that gnawed at him as a never-ending guilt. But this time, he no longer needed to grieve on their behalf.

He could finally protect them.

He would protect the living, the kind, the young, the new. Covered in wounds and drenched in bloody filth, he was willing to become mud, so long as they could grow beautiful flowers from the blood he shed into the soil.

Come, Gu Mang thought.

He seemed to see another soul before him, the soul that belonged to the Demonblood Beast Jingchen. It looked so evil and so massive, its head towering into the sky. But Gu Mang felt not the slightest fear or hopelessness. He walked toward it.

Come. You are me, and I am you.

He reached toward the Demonblood Beast in his mindscape, the same way Chen Tang had done in those visions.

It's over now.

The Demonblood Beast couldn't bear Gu Mang disrupting its mind; it was thoroughly bound, howling and in pain but incapable of freeing itself.

On Warrior Soul Mountain, Yue Chenqing saw his chance. Entirely ignorant of the consequences of the Demonblood Beast's death for Gu Mang, he raised a hand, following the order Gu Mang himself had given him. *"Fire!"*

The string twanged, and the arrow flew.

The arrow containing ten thousand soldiers' spiritual energy nailed itself into the Demonblood Beast's vital point in the moment the rising sun fully broke through the clouds. Its warm golden light spilled over the earth from behind the black peaks of the mountains, filling the world with brilliance. Daybreak, even in the direst circumstances, was always tranquil and pure. Even the pained howling of the evil beast seemed to fade as the morning sun solemnly climbed into the sky, the sound no longer so terrifying as it had been in the black of night.

Under the watching eyes of the soldiers on the peak of Warrior Soul Mountain, of the troops on the banks of the Fushui River, and of the civilians inside Chonghua City, the massive beast's movements grew sluggish, as if stuck in glue. In the majestic light of that new day, the beast raised its head; seven feet below its heart, the arrowhead had sunk deep.

Fresh blood dyed the creature's fur. It threw its head back and howled hysterically, tearing free of the golden binding chains forged by the cultivators on the riverside.

"No!"

"It didn't help! It's going to go berserk!"

Gu Mang made no sound. He sat on horseback, hovering above the Fushui River with eyes unblinking, watching as the earth-shaking demon beast was enveloped in the brilliant light that grew more splendid by the minute.

The beast bayed furiously, straightening its legs. Gu Mang watched it quietly. He was wracked with agony, a pain no less than when he had surrendered himself to the Liao Kingdom and had his spiritual energy ripped away and replaced with black magic. It was the pain of death. But this time, he didn't feel it, perhaps because he knew this suffering only belonged to the demon beast. Instead, he felt relief, reassurance, calm…

Yet there was also reluctance and remorse. Many years ago, he'd stepped onto a thorny path and never thought of turning back. Because of this, he hadn't dared make rash promises to Mo Xi about the future; he'd always felt it would be too unfair to Mo Xi. No one should give their whole heart to someone who was ready to sacrifice themselves at any moment.

In Gu Mang's heart, the flowers of the world and his little shidi were equally important. After having gone through so much, he still couldn't have both in the end.

Gu Mang turned, looking toward Murong Lian and Mo Xi fighting the guoshi in the distance. He tried to recall the last thing he'd said to Mo Xi, but he couldn't remember. He had wanted to leave the most tender words as a goodbye, but the sight of Mo Xi's face had driven him to blather about trivial things of no importance.

In truth, was there anyone who wanted to be a hero or a spy? Everyone wished to settle down somewhere with a few good friends and their own beloved, laughing together over the silly things in books or fretting over the weather ruining their plans to dry the laundry in the sun. All their worries would amount to no more than the rising prices of vegetables in the eastern market, or how this new type of rice wasn't as good as their usual pick.

But when fate came knocking, someone always had to go. No one wanted to leave, but someone had to act. Because he'd tasted the suffering of unanswered yearning and understood the pain of lovers separated, Gu Mang tenderly refused to let others experience it too. But he had fallen in love and gotten attached—and, with one wrong move, forsaken the love of his life.

"Mo Xi," Gu Mang mouthed silently toward the man in the distance. His lips moved, but he didn't know what else he should say. He'd known Mo Xi for so many years; they'd experienced so many things and

exchanged so many words. What was there left that they both didn’t already understand?

In the end, Gu Mang only murmured Mo Xi’s name a few more times, like a prayer, until he heard the cultivators beside him shout in wild joy.

“Look!”

“Look! The Demonblood Beast, i-it’s dying!”

Gu Mang turned. He started smiling, too.

I’ll take you home, I’ll bring you ashore, not because this piece of land is great, but because I’ve always believed that good will replace the bad and the new will replace the old, just as the black of night will always retreat before the light of dawn. After all, there are too many seeds of hope in the world. I wish for all of them to blossom into flowers. Even if they’re no more than tiny insignificant blooms.

The Demonblood Beast was faltering; after a final weak struggle, it fell to the earth with a great *boom*. Its life was fading. It was transforming into motes of light, flying into that sky that seemed to have been rinsed clean by dawn.

The soldiers were dead silent. Then jubilant cries rose from Warrior Soul Mountain, exploding from where the youngest troops were. Gu Mang wanted to laugh out loud at the sound. Young lives always held more vigor and hope. They could find victory and find happiness far faster than decrepit old soldiers like him.

Once, he too had been young. He’d ridden his horse over rolling grasslands with Lu Zhanxing, with Mo Xi, with his brothers. The crisp wind of the past swept over his face like it could scour clean the dirt of a lifetime.

In time, he had left his brothers behind at Phoenix Cry Mountain. He’d watched Lu Zhanxing’s head fall with his own eyes, and stabbed Mo Xi through the heart with his own two hands. He’d aged the instant he took his first innocent life. Chonghua’s General Gu grew old back then, he died back then. All this while, he had been so tired. He had shattered to dust long ago; it was faith alone that allowed him, just barely, to glue himself back together.

Today, this dead man could finally make good on the unfulfilled promise he'd made on the eve of his thirty-ninth battle: *I'll take you home.*

Gu Mang whispered these words beneath the thunderous shouting that had broken out and smiled just as he had when he was young. He watched the Demonblood Beast collapse into dust and light; he watched the people filling the mountains and the city outskirts, watched the city shout and rejoice. In those crowds, he saw Lu Zhanxing, the young Mo Xi, his own youthful self, and everyone that had died at Phoenix Cry Mountain, those unremarkable names that no one would remember, but he'd never dared to forget.

Ten thousand leagues of the nation bought with the blood of ten thousand souls. Today…I've finally brought you home. I can finally…return to your midst.

Gu Mang closed his eyes and fell from the back of the golden-winged pegasus, the blue and gold ribbon fluttering in his hair. He let his limbs go slack, tumbling into the great Fushui River amid the jubilant shouting that had yet to stop.

How nice. It was as if he'd never known defeat in this lifetime, as if he was taking off his armor and returning in triumph. All his suffering had faded away…

No one heard the splash as the surging river swallowed him up. He sank, his ears filled with nothing but rumbling water. He opened those clear blue eyes beneath the surface, taking one last glance at the sunlight growing farther and farther away, glimmering overhead like the stars they'd watched when they were young on the frontier. Beneath the starry sky, Lu Zhanxing was laughing loudly, his brothers were drinking wine, and the north wind was warm with the scent of pear-blossom white. Mo Xi sat quietly by the bonfire, listening to Gu Mang talk about worldly ideals, watching him glory in his carefree youth.

They were the best days of his life.

"Gu Mang—!"

Wild with joy over the Demonblood Beast's defeat, no one noticed Gu Mang fall until they heard the sound of someone shouting his name with a throat torn raw.

The Fushui was raging; the cultivators first looked in alarm toward Mo Xi. Only then did they discover that, while they were celebrating their victory, Gu Mang had slipped from the back of his golden-winged pegasus.

More cries went up. “General Gu!”

“What happened?”

“Where’s General Gu?!”

“Hurry and rescue him! Go down and rescue him!”

The guoshi took advantage of this chaos—with a vicious strum of his qin, he managed to wound the stricken Mo Xi. Only the quick intervention of Murong Lian stopped him from dealing the killing blow. Continuing to fight the guoshi now would be unwise.

But just as Murong Lian made to follow Mo Xi to the great Fushui River to bring Gu Mang ashore, he heard the guoshi’s menacing snort. “You two? As if *you two* can bring him back?”

Murong Lian’s face went pale. “What do you mean?”

But Mo Xi made no sound; he was trembling all over, deaf to anyone’s words. He charged red-eyed toward the churning water where Gu Mang had disappeared. Murong Lian couldn’t stop him, and not even the guoshi tried to block his way, letting him hurtle toward the banks of the Fushui.

Murong Lian turned toward the guoshi. “What the hell do you mean?!”

“Ah, what Gu Mang used was a technique similar to the one Chen Tang used back then to defeat and seal the Demonblood Beast,” the guoshi replied slowly, the eyes behind his mask flashing with inconstant light. “Chen Tang killed the Demonblood Beast, and then he died. Today Gu Mang did the same.”

“Bullshit!” Murong Lian cried, furious.

The guoshi burst into laughter. “If you don’t believe me, feel free to go look for him with Xihe-jun. Oh, and by the way—”

He stepped back toward the edge of the cliff behind him with the qin in his arms, speaking coolly. “Back then, my attack on the city failed

because of Chen Tang's desperate action. After hundreds of years, there's no way I would let the same trick stop me. This time, I refined a new spell before I re-tempered the Demonblood Beast Jingchen…"

After a moment of shock, realization hit Murong Lian. "What did you say?" The remaining color in his face disappeared. "Your attack on the city *back then*?!"

The guoshi smiled thinly. "Mn."

Murong Lian's face was as white as paper. "So y-you are…"

The man before him removed his mask, exposing a face that was chiseled and handsome, but filled with malevolence. Murong Lian reacted as if he'd been struck by lightning, taking a few stumbling steps back. "You—you're!"

The guoshi looked up, baring his eerie white teeth in a grin. "Since it's come to this, I can't be bothered to keep up the act. You're correct. The previous king of Liao, Hua Po'an…" He smiled. "That would be me."

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Murong Lian’s throat had gone dry. He couldn’t say a thing in that moment. He heard shocked shouts from the cultivators in the distance, on the banks of the Fushui.

“What’s happening?!”

“What is this?!”

He turned. A surging blood pool had appeared where the Demonblood Beast Jingchen had vanished on the banks of the river. That dark pool seemed to have a life of its own, expanding outward as he watched…

Hua Po’an shot a careless glance over, cocking his head and laughing. “How does it look? I learned my lesson when Chen Tang gave his life for the country and added a new spell—if the Demonblood Beast is killed, its blood will become an endlessly expanding pool. Unless I give the order, it will continue growing without cease, swallowing the mountains and creeks, the city walls, the living and the dead… If you refuse to surrender, I don’t mind reducing Chonghua to an ocean of blood.” He licked his lips, his voice sinking into an eerie timbre. “In any case, hundreds of years have passed, and much has changed. There’s nothing in Chonghua I can’t bear to part with.”

He threw the mask carelessly to the ground. “For now, I’ll spare your life. Go back and tell the people of Chonghua what I’ve said. The blood pool will swallow Chonghua City within ten days. I’ll give you ten days to decide: surrender or die. It’s up to you.”

With that, he swept his sleeves and leapt up with qinggong. Fluttering like a paper kite, he disappeared into the depths of the Liao encampment’s fire beacons.

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Chapter 189:
After the Separation

IT WAS JUST AS Hua Po'an had said. The blood pool the Demonblood Beast had become grew bigger and bigger, swallowing the plants by the riverside and polluting the river moat's water. Slowly, the walls of the city began to collapse, brick and tile tumbling into the bloody water and melting into thick crimson sludge.

This sort of invasion didn't feature the thunderous clashes of a confrontation between two armies, where victory and defeat were decided in moments. Instead, it was like a venomous snake winding through thick grass, unhinging its jaw inch by inch, ready to swallow the prey in front of it…

During these days, Chonghua and Liao did not fight. That roiling river the color of blood divided the two forces; Chonghua stayed in dead silence, while the Liao Kingdom began to wildly rejoice.

At nightfall, Mo Xi walked up the city tower alone, peering over the vermilion railing of a turret sporting a dragon's head gargoyle. The blood pool lay beneath him. Across the wide, crimson river, the lanterns of the Liao Kingdom encampment were lit. Cultivators sat around their stoves, bonfires burning, behaving with the ease of an army whose victory was within their grasp.

Li Wei, the housekeeper of Xihe Manor, had accompanied Mo Xi. He waited quietly beneath the turret with his hands crossed in his sleeves and his head bowed.

"Housekeeper Li," a low-level cultivator asked him in concern, "is Xihe-jun okay…?"

Li Wei was silent. Despite his silver tongue, there was nothing he could say. Was Mo Xi okay? He wasn't sure. No one could answer this question.

After Gu Mang lost his life, the soldiers of Chonghua thought Mo Xi would go mad. They thought he'd collapse, that he'd self-destruct, that he'd want to die from heartbreak.

But he hadn't.

Chonghua's cultivators threw spell after spell into the blood pool the Demonblood Beast had become, but they couldn't dredge up Gu Mang no matter which methods they used. They couldn't even recover his corpse. In the end, it was Mo Xi who told them: *Stop looking, go back and rest. The war is not yet won.*

He and Gu Mang had both lived lives of military glory paid for with ten thousand sacrifices. They'd seen too many separated by the chasm between life and death amid the fires of war. The brother you drank with one day might become a lifeless corpse the next. They had no time to grieve, no time to internalize the tragedy, no time to digest this person's death. Everything was done in haste. Duty forced a general back to clarity of mind, because the war was not yet won.

If a soldier lost control from grief, they might pay with their life. If a commander lost control from grief, they would drag all their men to their deaths. Mo Xi knew he didn't have that right. The only thing he could do was stand a little while longer, gazing at the blood pool and the Liao Army, leaning over the railing above the sea of blood where his beloved had lost his life.

But only for a little while longer.

The low-level cultivator couldn't help asking: "Is Xihe-jun not sad?"

This time, Li Wei replied quickly. "He doesn't have a heart of stone; of course he's sad." Li Wei sighed inwardly, gazing at Mo Xi's solitary figure beneath the starry sky.

On the night Gu Mang fell into the blood pool, it was Mo Xi himself who ordered the cultivators back to the city to rest, forestalling them from any meaningless attempts at rescue. Many had been shocked at Mo Xi's cold-blooded composure. Only Li Wei knew what Mo Xi had been like that night after he returned, in that room of Xihe Manor where Gu Mang had once lived, where he shed all his status and duty.

Li Wei had thought to tidy this room whose owner was gone, but before he pushed open the door, he glimpsed the silhouette of Mo Xi's back where he sat at the little table. The letters and notes Gu Mang had written were spread out over its surface. Mo Xi was reading them, page after page by the light of that dying lamp. The events and observations Gu Mang had recorded were all happy things. Very rarely did he complain about anything. Mo Xi sat and buried himself in the beautiful past that Gu Mang had left behind.

Fandou whined as he lay by his feet, as if asking where Gu Mang had gone, as if asking him, *Why hasn't Gu Mang come back?*

After a few moments, Mo Xi lowered his head. Low sobs finally came from within that room; they were suppressed, just as he suppressed the shaking of his shoulders. But how could it all be contained? He had bitterly endured for so long; all that was left to him was grief, suffering, and duty… Beyond that, he truly had nothing else.

In the past few years, he'd experienced false betrayal, genuine mistakes, and the aching pain of separation. Each time, he would tell himself to bear it for a little while longer, endure it for a little while longer, and this too would pass.

When he saw Gu Mang a few days ago, standing beneath those banners snapping in the wind and glowing with vitality, he'd thought all their suffering had come to an end; he thought that after this battle, he would have finally held on long enough to attain his lasting companionship.

But in the end, the only thing left for him was this empty little room. The owner of the room had left, as if he'd merely been staying as a guest. Few signs of his occupancy remained. It seemed that, after experiencing so much suffering, the reward for Mo Xi's endurance wasn't lasting companionship but an eternal separation.

Mo Xi picked up that stack of soft paper and pressed it to his chest, close to where his heart beat. As if the writer of those words had left some warmth on the pages. He couldn't hold back anymore. Hoarsely, weakly, softly, he cried, "Gu Mang…"

Gu Mang.

He couldn’t say anything else after that. He wasn’t the pillar of the empire, he wasn’t General Mo. At that moment, he was just a defenseless man who had been forever separated from the one he loved; he was just the little shidi Gu-shixiong left behind in a sea of blood.

All his comrades were gone: those seventy thousand dead souls, those brothers who had marched with them when they were young. And now Gu Mang was gone too. Mo Xi was the only one left behind. It was just him alone in the time before dawn. Whether in love or in hatred, his Gu Mang-gege would never turn back to look at him, smile brashly at him, or get upset with him in his confusion.

A sob like a dying beast wailing in agony tore through the last of his self-control. Mo Xi hunched over, sobbing, grieving… In the end, like a trapped beast that had lost its lifetime mate, like a lion alone at the end of its life, he cried himself breathless in this silent night, exhausted and despairing.

A life was so long, and the world was so vast. Only this moment, this space, was his alone.

With a last look at his back, Li Wei sighed and gently closed the door for him.

Mo Xi had never been heartless. Li Wei knew as perhaps no one else in all of Chonghua did what Gu Mang had truly meant to Mo Xi. He wasn’t light or fire; he wasn’t hope, a lover, or a brother… To Mo Xi, Gu Mang might have meant more than all of those things together. It wasn’t abandonment when Mo Xi ordered the cultivators to stop wasting energy searching for Gu Mang. Mo Xi knew better than anyone what choice Gu Mang had made, what Gu Mang wanted—and whether he would come back.

Li Wei left the little courtyard. He respected and revered his lord very much. In truth, even before the emperor had bestowed him upon Mo Xi, he’d felt that Xihe-jun was the backbone of Chonghua.

Now, that backbone had broken where no one else could see. He hurt terribly; it was nearly impossible for him to keep going. But everyone else in the nation only saw Mo Xi’s strength, and forgot that he was a living man of flesh and blood. He had just lost the person most dear to him, but the only place Mo Xi was allowed to catch his breath as a human being, to

mourn, to yearn, to embrace that lost person's scent, was this small and lonely room. This was his home with his Gu Mang-gege.

Li Wei couldn't bear to disturb him, nor bear to look again. This was Mo Xi's goodbye to Gu Mang. It had nothing to do with Xihe-jun, with General Gu, with rank or hierarchy, life or death, or anyone else. He was the housekeeper of Xihe Manor. He would keep this secret for his lord till the end.

By the fourth day, a good chunk of Chonghua City had been swallowed by the blood pool. The residents were evacuated to other quarters of the city and watched as their homes became a sea of blood.

Thankfully, Yue Chenqing was familiar with mechanism techniques; within the records Murong Chuyi had left behind, there was a scroll concerning how to quickly build homes for refugees. He followed the diagrams and temporarily resolved the issue of these people's shelter.

That was Murong Chuyi's work. Yue Chenqing thought that if his fourth uncle were alive, he would have done a much better job than he had. But his xiao-jiujiu was no longer here. Only Yue Chenqing could continue to carry Murong Chuyi's gentleness into this turbulent world.

"Fourth Uncle, I might not have done it as well as you, but…" He looked up at the starry night sky. His fingers, blistered from overwork, were trembling, but he didn't put down the bamboo warrior he was working on. "But I will do everything you wanted to do, according to your wishes. I am Yue Chenqing, your nephew, head of the Yue Clan, and your successor."

The brilliant stars flickered, lending their light to this world of smoke and flame, and shone down on Yue Chenqing's eyes, glistening with tears. Quietly, he choked out, "Do you see it…from up there in the sky…?"

In the past, you were always silently protecting me. Now it's my turn, Uncle. I'll protect our home.

Yue Chenqing had spoken for more than himself: everyone in Chonghua was currently fighting to protect their home and country. In the past, this nation had been no more than a field of scattered sand, but

because people like Gu Mang and Murong Chuyi had made their sacrifices in fresh blood, and because they would have nowhere to go if they lost this battle, everyone understood the situation they were in. That scattered sand had finally gathered into a strong and solid wall.

The blood pool expanded without end, but in the face of despair, the people's tenacity grew instead of disappearing. They all looked for a way to reverse their situation.

On the fifth day, while all of the nobles and top commanders were within the Bureau of Military Affairs in the palace, studying methods to stop the blood pool from growing, a guard came to report.

"Xihe-jun! Wangshu-jun! Princess Mengze." The guard made his obeisance toward the three most powerful and reliable people before him. "Medicine Master Jiang is back! He's waiting outside the hall!"

When Jiang Fuli came in, everyone was shocked stiff. Though his wife Su Yurou wore a white veil that hid her face, the cup she held slipped from her hand and smashed into fragments on the ground. "Fuli, you—"

Jiang Fuli wore a set of green and silver robes, but the luxury of their weave couldn't disguise the exhaustion that hung about him from his travels. The most shocking detail was his eye. That night-blind left eye of his was wrapped in snowy-white bandages mottled with crimson bloodstains, entirely sightless.

At the crash of the teacup, Jiang Fuli looked calmly over at Su Yurou with his clear almond-shaped right eye. In the moment their gazes met, they seemed to exchange some secret knowledge, and Su Yurou sagged pathetically. Mo Xi heard her say in an almost inaudible whisper: "Preceptor."

Jiang Fuli's clothes were bedraggled, but his countenance was resolute. That face undoubtedly belonged to the cunning salesman Medicine Master Jiang, yet somehow, his bearing had changed completely; the expression he wore was foreign on his face, as if it belonged to a different man. The person before them looked gentle, calm, and determined, unlike the Medicine Master Jiang they had known.

The old Medicine Master Jiang had given off the impression that he didn't know what he wanted or cared about other than money. That

Medicine Master Jiang of the past had been heartless and merciless, a hollow man. But the version of him who had arrived today seemed to have finally summoned his missing soul.

He swept a glance around the room with his beautiful remaining eye. His gaze ran across Murong Lian and Murong Mengze, then paused momentarily before eventually landing on Mo Xi. He studied Mo Xi in silence for a few moments before he spoke, voice low. “Xihe-jun, I have something important to tell you. I ask you to step aside so we may confer.”

Jiang Fuli spoke with a good deal of courtesy, but his words carried an inexplicable air of command. Everyone in the room felt the sudden change in Jiang Fuli’s temperament. When Mo Xi looked in his direction, he couldn’t help a twinge of anxiety.

Murong Lian took a sharp pull of ephemera and raised a hand, grabbing Mo Xi before he could leave with Jiang Fuli. “Hold it.” He narrowed those sultry peach-blossom eyes to slits, staring at Jiang Fuli. “Are you the real Medicine Master Jiang, or another fake?”

“When you were seven, you put a thick layer of silk paper in your shoes because you didn’t like that Gu Mang was taller than you. As a result, you accidentally tripped and cut your head; the stitches numbered—”

“Stop stop stop!” Murong Lian looked mortified, then instantly tried to bury it beneath composure. “Enough! I know you’re the real one now, okay?”

He released Mo Xi in embarrassment, rolling his eyes as he cursed under his breath.

Jiang Fuli led Mo Xi to a side room in the palace hall. Once the attendants had withdrawn, Jiang Fuli waved a hand, and a glimmering protective barrier came down on all sides of the room.

At the sight of that barrier, Mo Xi’s breath caught in his throat. “The Holy Spirit Barrier was lost a hundred years ago…” He looked sidelong at Jiang Fuli’s lean face; the medicine master’s expression was resolute, but his cheeks were sunken. Su Yurou’s murmured *Preceptor* echoed in his ears. An outrageous thought exploded across Mo Xi’s mind, and the question was out of his mouth before he could stop it: “Who *are* you?”

Silent, Jiang Fuli sat down before the table. The room was very quiet, lit by the shimmering light of that Holy Spirit Barrier. Mo Xi could hear the sound of his own heart pounding. After a span, he quietly tried, “Preceptor Chen?”

Jiang Fuli looked up. His remaining almond eye was bright brown and calm. “I’m not him. Chen Tang died hundreds of years ago. I’m Jiang Fuli, that’s all.” He paused for a moment, then changed the subject. “I heard about General Gu.”

Gu Mang’s name was like a sharp needle driven into Mo Xi’s shattered heart. Mo Xi lowered his long lashes; they fluttered slightly as they obscured his eyes.

“He was still so young,” Jiang Fuli said. “He hadn’t received the reverence he deserved or the peace he should have had. He and Chen Tang are not the same… They both sacrificed their lives to end the demon beast, but General Gu still had things he yearned for and inseparable attachments to this world.”

At the words *inseparable attachments*, he looked straight at Mo Xi. “But Chen Tang didn’t. When Chen Tang chose to die with the demon beast, he had lost all faith; he had nothing left to yearn for and no attachment to life. Chen Tang wished to die, while Gu Mang wished to live.” Jiang Fuli shook his head. “I’m sorry. It shouldn’t have come to this.”

Mo Xi frowned. “But if you’re not Chen Tang, how can you know what Chen Tang felt when he died?”

As Mo Xi had expected, Jiang Fuli went silent. “That is a very complicated story to tell.”

“I’m willing to listen.”

Jiang Fuli paused, as if considering how best to begin. “Back when I was treating Gu Mang, I shared a portion of his memories. I saw you two at Bat Island, meeting a maiden named Wuyan.”

“That demoness who loved Chen Tang…”

“Correct,” Jiang Fuli affirmed. “When I saw his memories, I felt I’d seen her somewhere before.”

Jiang Fuli poured two cups of strong tea and pushed one over to Mo Xi, claiming the other one for himself. Only then did Mo Xi notice that the white gauze crossing Jiang Fuli's face appeared sunken; it did not betray the curve of an eye. Jiang Fuli's eye was completely gone. Yet he seemed not to care at all, as if his health and body were completely meaningless to him.

"In the many years I've been in Chonghua, there have been no shortage of people who've asked which country I hailed from, or inquired about my past. I never replied to any of them. You might find me indifferent and aloof, unwilling to speak, but that's not the truth." He shook his head with a grimace. "I really don't know *who* I am."

He continued, "Almost all the memories I have begin from when Yurou and I were fleeing across the lands. She said I was ill, that I forgot my past, and I, lost and confused, believed her completely. My identity, my origins, my family… Everything I said was what Yurou told me. Trying to recall my past made me feel ill; I was instinctively repulsed, and so I never thought deeply on this matter.

"But in the past few years…I began to dream. I saw the same faces and events, again and again. They were fragments, without any semblance of order, and Yurou would say nothing about them. Whenever I asked her, she said she didn't know, and I didn't investigate… Until recently, when I examined Gu Mang and saw his memories of Bat Island. The Wuyan he saw was identical to the girl in my dreams."

Jiang Fuli closed his eyes. "I thought that if I went to see Wuyan, I might learn what kind of person I used to be."

Mo Xi remembered how distracted Jiang Fuli had seemed after he treated Gu Mang. For *this* to be the reason…

"So these travels of yours," said Mo Xi, "were to visit Bat Island?"

"That was just one of my stops. I went to other places as well… Do you remember that paradise of eternal spring where Wuyan first met Chen Tang?"

Mo Xi nodded.

"I found that, too. It's actually an islet on the back of a Xuanwu. This Xuanwu made an oath with Chen Tang's ancestors to guard a lost piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree."

Mo Xi’s eyes went wide. “The Flame Emperor’s sacred tree… The first tree in the human world, the king of all trees?”

“Yes,” Jiang Fuli said. “The Flame Emperor’s sacred tree, king of all trees, ten thousand flowers of the human world blooming from one trunk. A piece of haitang wood from this tree was lost in the mortal world; by coincidence, a thousand years ago, it landed in the hands of Chen Tang’s ancestor.

“Chen Tang’s clan knew this sacred tree was a formidable weapon, that its power was nothing to be trifled with. If the news of it spread, there’d be countless challengers trying to take it for themselves. The Chen Clan had always abhorred conflict, and thus they sealed this piece of sacred haitang wood within Xuanwu Island and spoke no word of it to outsiders.

“Within the sacred tree, however, dwelled a sentient spirit. In order for this spirit to remain peaceful and honorable, uncorrupted by malevolent energies, the head of the family was obligated to live on the island for a month each year to play the qin and teach it.”

Mo Xi understood. When Wuyan encountered the strong immortal energy, the ever-blooming flowers, and the springlike mildness of all seasons on the island, she’d incorrectly assumed Chen Tang was its source. In truth, she’d been completely off the mark. The immortal energy came not from Chen Tang, but from the branch of the ancient tree Chen Tang was guarding.

“It’s been centuries since Chen Tang passed,” said Mo Xi. “His clan was wiped out in that last brutal battle with Hua Po’an. It should have been hundreds of years since anyone visited that immortal island. What did you see when you went to look? Was the sacred tree still there?”

“It was,” replied Jiang Fuli. “When I found that Xuanwu Island, I saw that the plants were flourishing and the flowers were thriving. Over hundreds of years, the haitang branch had turned that island into a place brimming with the sacred tree’s energy—but I also saw that haitang tree had begun to attain consciousness. When I played a piece Chen Tang played before, the flowers on the tree bloomed, as if it liked it. Perhaps in a few hundred more years, the Xuanwu seal won’t have the power to hold it anymore. It may fall into the vast ocean of its own volition and go take a look at the human world.”

As Jiang Fuli finished his tale, he smiled. “I’m curious about its future. But the final destination of this piece of sacred wood, hundreds of years down the line, isn’t something a mortal like me can control.”

“Medicine Master Jiang, why do you know Chen Tang’s family background so well?” Mo Xi paused. “Are you really not Preceptor Chen?”

Jiang Fuli set down his cup and sighed. “Before I went to the islet, I went to Bat Island and sought out Wuyan; it was she who helped me recover the rest of my memories. When I did, I was able to give her closure. Indeed, I am not Chen Tang, but for the past few centuries, there’s been someone who’s wished more than anything for me to become him.”

Mo Xi started. “Who?”

Jiang Fuli looked up, three syllables falling from his thin lips. “Hua Po’an.”

At Mo Xi’s expression, Jiang Fuli seemed to grimace. “You think this is absurd. I thought so as well. I have all of Chen Tang’s memories and feelings, but I know I’m not him.”

“Then you are…”

“I’m merely one of his cousins. As for my own name…” Jiang Fuli’s tone was mild. “Over the past centuries, Hua Po’an named me Chen Tang, and Su Yurou named me Jiang Fuli. I’ve been lost and confused for so many years, and have long since forgotten my real name. All I know is that I’m a simulacrum constructed against my own will, created because Hua Po’an couldn’t reconcile himself to the fact of Chen Tang’s death. My body contains Chen Tang’s memories, the remnants of his soul, his techniques, and his past.”

His voice was low, measured and gentle, without any sign of strong emotion, but listening, Mo Xi felt an extraordinary sorrow.

“I’m a puppet, no better than Murong Chuyi’s bamboo warriors or Jiang Yexue’s clay figurines.”

Even in his shock, Mo Xi couldn’t help protesting, “Medicine Master Jiang…” But he didn’t know what to say to console him.

“You don’t need to comfort me,” Jiang Fuli said. “You’re heartbroken enough yourself. Perhaps others can’t tell, but I can. The reason I rushed

back today wasn't to find someone to spill my secrets to. I came to offer a plan for victory. Since Hua Po'an thinks of me as Chen Tang, it wouldn't do for me to miss this second battle hundreds of years later."

Mo Xi tensed. "You know how to keep the blood pool from expanding?"

"I know of a method no one has tried, though I can't guarantee its success. We can only make the attempt," Jiang Fuli said. "But on Xuanwu Island, I performed a divination. The sacred hexagram said that as long as you, Xihe-jun, complete a certain task, everything could change. Even death."

Realization dawned. "Even death…"

"Correct."

Mo Xi's eyes flickered to life. What…did that mean? Although he found the idea absurd, his blood rushed faster, the fingers he'd balled into fists quivering slightly. "I ask the Medicine Master for instruction."

Jiang Fuli rose, shooting a glance outside as he moved to lean against the window. By now, the Demonblood Beast's blood pool had expanded into the city; it was slowly devouring the entire imperial capital. He turned back to Mo Xi, producing a dark, obsidian-like crystal, which he placed on the table.

"Chen Tang's clan guarded two hidden treasures. The first was the branch of the sacred tree that I spoke of earlier. The other was this crystal. This is the most secret and most important treasure of Chen Tang's clan, and Chonghua's only hope for resolving this calamity." Jiang Fuli paused. "There's still time. Before you use it, I'll tell you in detail about the past events I know—a section of the past related to Chonghua's greatest enemy, Hua Po'an."

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Remnants of Filth
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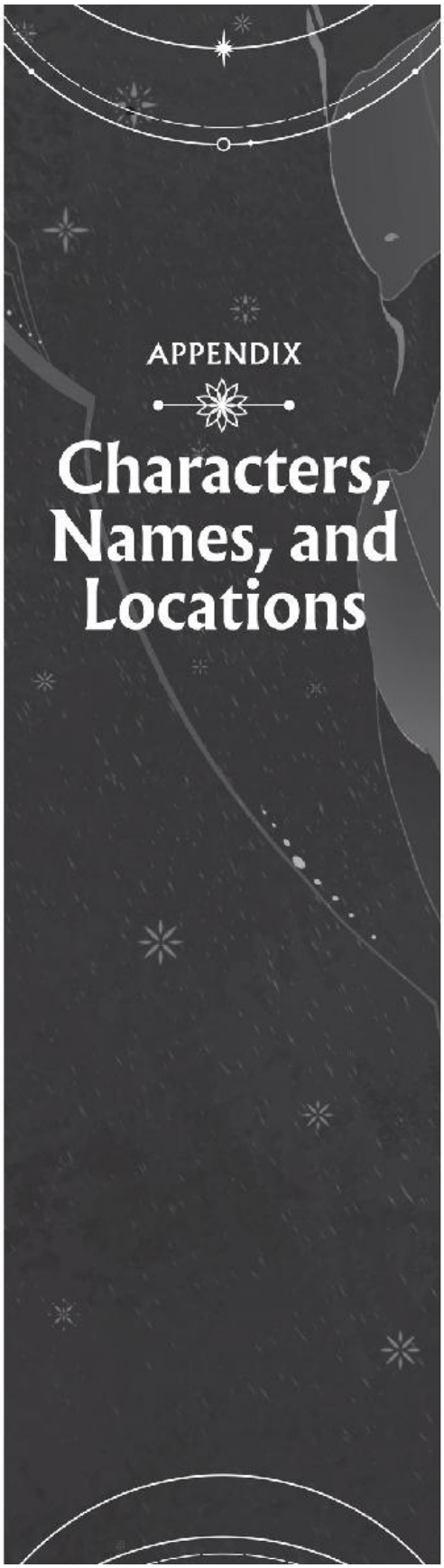

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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Appendix:
Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

Mo Xi

Surname Mo; Given Name Xi, “extinguish”

Titles: Xihe-jun (/ “sun,” literary), General Mo

Weapons:

Shuairan (/ a mythical snake): A whip that can transform into a sword as needed. Named after a snake from Chinese mythology, said to respond so quickly an attack to any part of its body would be met immediately with its fangs or tail (or both). First mentioned in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* as an ideal for commanders to follow when training their armies.

Tuntian (/ “Skyswallower”): A scepter cast with the essence of a whale spirit.

The commander of the Northern Frontier Army, Mo Xi is the only living descendant of the illustrious Mo Clan. Granted the title Xihe-jun by the late emperor, he possesses extraordinary innate spiritual abilities and has a reputation for being coldly ruthless.

Gu Mang

Surname Gu, “to look”; Given Name Mang, “bewilderment”

Titles: Beast of the Altar, General Gu

Weapons:

Yongye (/ “Evernight”): A demonic dagger from the Liao Kingdom.

Fengbo (/ “Wind and waves”): A suona used by General Gu.

Once the dazzling shixiong of the cultivation academy, Murong Lian's slave, and war general to the empire of Chonghua, Gu Mang fell from grace and turned traitor, defecting to the enemy Liao Kingdom. Years later, he was sent back to Chonghua as a prisoner of war. His name comes from the line "I unsheathe my sword and look around bewildered" in the first of three poems in the collection "Arduous Journey" by Li Bai, lamenting the sense of loss and obstruction the poet faced upon being sent away from the capital by Emperor Xuanzong.

Murong Lian

Surname Murong; Given Name Lian, "mercy"

Title: Wangshu-jun (/ "moon," literary)

Weapon:

Water Demon Talisman ( ): A talisman that becomes a horde of water demons to attack its target.

Gu Mang's former master and cousin to the current emperor, Murong Lian is the current lord of Wangshu Manor and the owner of Luomei Pavilion. He is known as the "Greed" of Chonghua's three poisons.

Jiang Yexue

Surname Jiang; Given Name Yexue, "evening snow"

Title: Qingxu Elder (/ "clear dawn")

Disowned son of the Yue Clan, Yue Chenqing's older brother, and Mo Xi's old friend, Jiang Yexue is a gentleman to the core.

Yue Chenqing

Surname Yue; Given Name Chenqing, "morning sun"

Title: Deputy General Yue

Young master of the Yue Clan and Murong Chuyi's nephew, Yue Chenqing is a happy-go-lucky child with a penchant for getting into trouble.

Murong Chuyi

Surname Murong; Given Name Chuyi, surname Chu, “clothes”

Yue Chenqing’s Fourth Uncle, Chonghua’s “Ignorance,” and all-around enigma, Murong Chuyi is a master artificer whose true motivations remain unknown.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Auntie Lin

A servant in Wangshu Manor with a disfigured face.

Changfeng-jun

“long, abundance”

An older noble worrying himself sick over his daughter Lan-er.

Chen Tang

Surname Chen, Given Name Tang, “flowering apple”

Chonghua’s legendary Wise Gentleman, who was once the headmaster of the cultivation academy as well as guoshi of the nation. He perished in battle with Hua Po’an, a slave cultivator-turned-traitor whom he had personally taught.

The Emperor

Title: His Imperial Majesty, “junshang”

Eccentric ruler of the empire of Chonghua. Due to the cultural taboo against using the emperor's given name in any context, he is only ever addressed and referred to as "His Imperial Majesty."

Fandou

"bib"

A loyal black dog and Gu Mang's best friend.

Guoshi of the Liao Kingdom

"imperial preceptor"

A mercurial and immensely powerful Liao Kingdom official who conceals his true identity behind a golden mask.

Hua Po'an

"flower breaking the darkness"

Chonghua's infamous first slave general. After learning cultivation under the beneficence of Chen Tang, Hua Po'an turned on Chonghua and became the founding monarch of the Liao Kingdom.

Jiang Fuli

Surname Jiang; Given Name Fuli, "to brush away, multitudes"

Also known by his title of Medicine Master, Jiang Fuli is the finest healer in Chonghua, dubbed the "Wrath" of Chonghua's three poisons.

Jingchen

"Purify filth"

The weakened form of the Demonblood Beast and the Liao Kingdom guoshi's pet obsession.

Lan-er

“orchid”

A sweet little girl with a dangerously volatile spiritual core.

Li Wei

Surname Li; Given Name Wei, “slight”

The competent, if harried, head housekeeper of Xihe Manor.

Lu Zhanxing

Surname Lu; Given Name Zhanxing, “to exhibit stars”

Gu Mang’s oldest friend, who grew up with him as a slave in Wangshu Manor. Later his deputy general of the Wangba Army.

Murong Mengze

Surname Murong; Given Name Mengze, “Yunmeng Lake”

A master healer and the “Virtue” of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, Princess Mengze’s frail constitution and graceful, refined manner are known to all.

Murong Xuan

Surname Murong, given name Xuan, “dark”

The late Wangshu-jun, Murong Lian’s father.

Su Yurou

Surname Su; Given Name Yurou, “jade, soft”

Known as the most peerless beauty in Chonghua. Jiang Fuli’s reclusive wife.

Yue Juntian

Surname Yue, given name Juntian, “great sky”

The patriarch of the Yue Clan and a master artificer.

Zhao Susu (Madam Zhao)

Surname Zhao, given name Susu, “pure”

Murong Xuan’s wife and Murong Lian’s mother, a beautiful woman of aristocratic birth.

Zhou He

Surname Zhou, given name He, “crane”

Weapon:

Lieying ( ): A pitch-black dagger.

The leader of Sishu Terrace. Obsessed with discovering new magical techniques using any means necessary.

Locations

Dongting Lake

A real lake in northeastern Hunan, named “Grotto Court Lake” for the dragon court that was said to reside in its depths.

Luomei Pavilion

“Gardens of Fallen Plum Blossoms”

A house of pleasure where the nobility of Chonghua could have their pick of captives from enemy nations.

Shennong Terrace

The healers' ministry of Chonghua. Shennong is the deity and mythological ruler said to have taught agriculture and herbal medicine to the ancient Chinese people.

Warrior Soul Mountain

Where the heroes of Chonghua are laid to rest.

Cixin Artificing Forge

"Kind Heart"

A shabby forge in Chonghua's capital where uncommonly humane spiritual weapons are refined.

Dream Butterfly Islands

An archipelago of demonic islands not far from Chonghua. The archipelago is composed of around twenty islands, and different types of demons live on each one.

Da'ze City

"Large Pond"

One of Chonghua's major border cities, located near a lake, where Chen Tang once sealed the Demonblood Beast.

Bat Island

One of the Dream Butterfly Islands, Bat Island is inhabited by fire bats, demons descended from the feathered tribe of Mount Jiuhua. The bats on their island are led by their queen, Wuyan.

Sishu Terrace

"Overseeing Magic"

An organization in Chonghua specializing in magical techniques and healing.

Golden Terrace

The most secretive and secluded hall at the back of the imperial palace, reserved for the emperor's most trusted subjects.

Name Guide

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Lao-: A familiar prefix meaning "old." Usually used for older men.

-er: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally "son" or "child." Always a suffix.

Family

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege/Dage: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend.

-jiu/Jiujiu: Maternal uncle.

Cultivation

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Shifu: Teacher or master.

Shixiong: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

Shidi: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang/Shenjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators. Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators.

Other

Gongzi: Young man from an affluent household.

Guozhu: The ruler of a nation.

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Laoban: A term of address for a shopkeeper or the proprietor of a business that means "boss."

-niang: Suffix for a young lady, similar to "Miss."

Shaozhu: Young master and direct heir of a household.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to "Mister."

Xiongzhang: Respectful term of address meaning "older brother."

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Remnants of Filth.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

NAMES

Yú Wū

Yú: Y as in **y**ou, ú as in "u" in the French "tu"

Wū as in **woo**

Mò Xī

Mò as in **mo**urning

Xī as in **chi**c

Gù Máng

Gù as in **goo**p

Máng as in **mong**rel

Mùróng Lián

Mù as in **moo**n
Róng as in **wrong /** c**rone**
Lián as in batta**lion**

Yuè Chénqíng
Yuè: Y as in **y**ammer, uè as in **whe**lp
Chén as in ki**tchen**
Qíng as in ma**tching**

Jiāng Yèxuě
Jiāng as in mah**jong**
Yè as in **ye**s
Xuě: X as in **sh**oot, uě as in **we**t

Mùróng Chǔyī
Mù as in **moo**n
Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e
Chǔ as in **choo**se
Yī as in **ea**se

Mùróng Mèngzé
Mù as in **mo**on
Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e
Mèng as in a**mong**
Zé as in pia**zza**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

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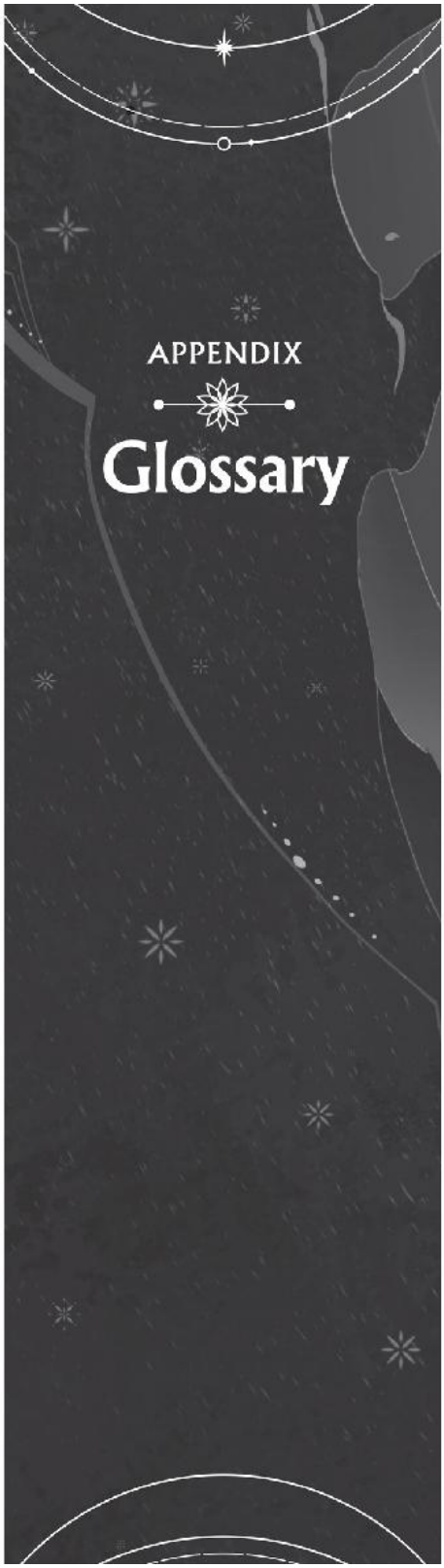

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Appendix:
Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (　/ “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (　/ “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres. Most wuxia stories are set in ancient China and feature protagonists who practice martial arts and seek to redress wrongs. Although characters may possess seemingly superhuman abilities, they are typically mastered through practice instead of supernatural or magical means. Plots tend to focus on human relationships and power struggles between various sects and alliances. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example of the genre is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (　/ “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Some xianxia works focus on immortal beings such as gods or demons, whereas others (such as *Remnants of Filth*) are concerned with the conflicts of mortals who practice cultivation. In the latter case, characters strive to become stronger by

harnessing their spiritual powers, with some aiming to extend their lifespan or achieve immortality.

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TERMINOLOGY

Cowrie shells: Cowrie shells were the earliest form of currency used in central China.

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivation is the means by which mortals with spiritual aptitude develop and harness supernatural abilities. The practitioners of these methods are called cultivators. The path of one's cultivation is a concept that draws heavily from Daoist traditions. Generally, it comprises innate spiritual development (i.e., formation of a spiritual core) as well as spells, talismans, tools, and weapons with specific functions.

Di and shu hierarchy: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives, though only one would be the official or "di" wife, and her sons would take precedence over the sons of the "shu" wives. "Di" sons were prioritized in matters of inheritance.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Ephemera: In the world of *Remnants of Filth*, a drug from the Liao Kingdom. Its name is likely a reference to the line, "Life is like a dream ephemeral, how short our joys can be," from "A Party Amidst Brothers in the Peach Blossom Garden" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like their namesake.

Face: Mianzi ( ), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone who acts brazenly and without shame.

Foxglove Tree: The foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa* (/ paotonghua), also known as empress tree or princess tree, is native to China. In flower language, the foxglove tree symbolizes “eternal waiting,” specifically that of a secret admirer.

Foxtail Grass: In flower language, green foxtail grass, Setaria viridis (/ gouweibacao), symbolizes “secret, difficult yearning,” often in reference to star-crossed love.

Gentleman: The term junzi ( ) is used to refer to someone of noble character. Historically, it was typically reserved for men.

Gu Poison: A legendary poison created by sealing many types of venomous creatures in one vessel until only one survivor remains, which would then possess the strongest and most complex poison. The term may be used as a stand-in for dark poisons of all types.

Guoshi: A powerful imperial official who served as an advisor to the emperor. Sometimes translated as “state preceptor,” this was a post with considerable authority in some historical regimes.

Horsetail Whisk: Consisting of a long wooden handle with horsehair bound to one end, the horsetail whisk (/ fuchen, “brushing off dust”) symbolizes cleanliness and the sweeping away of mortal concerns in

Buddhist and Daoist traditions. It is usually carried in the crook of one's arm.

Immortal-Binding Ropes or Cables: A staple of xianxia, immortal-binding cables are ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

Incense Time: A measure of time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Inexact by nature, an incense time is commonly assumed to be about thirty minutes, though it can be anywhere from five minutes to an hour.

Jade: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word "jade" can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (/ "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Kowtow: The kowtow (/ "knock head") is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity; in severe circumstances, it's common for the supplicant's forehead to end up bloody and bruised.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from muddy waters. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Liuli: Colorful glazed glass. When used as a descriptor for eye color, it refers to a bright brown.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Mythical Creatures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Remnants of Filth*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (/ canglong, or / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Bixi: A legendary figure who was the sixth son of the Dragon King, usually depicted as a dragon with the shell of a tortoise and traditionally used as the base of commemorative tablets.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Guhuo niao: A mythical bird created by the grief of women who died in childbirth; their song mimics the sound of babies crying as the bird seeks to steal chicks and human infants for itself.

Shangao: A small piglike animal said to live in the mountains, vivid scarlet in color, with a decidedly foul manner of speech.

Taotie: A mythical beast that represents greed, as it is composed of only a head and a mouth and eats everything in sight until its death. Taotie designs are symmetrical down their zoomorphic faces and most commonly seen on bronzeware from the Shang dynasty.

Tengshe, or Soaring snake: A mythical serpent that can fly.

Xingtian: A mythical deity who was decapitated in his battle with the Yellow Emperor but nevertheless continued to fight; a symbol of perseverance.

Xuannü: Also known as the Dark Lady, the goddess of sex, longevity, and war.

Zhen niao: Also known as the poison-feather bird, this mythical creature is said to be so poisonous its feathers were used in assassinations, as dipping one in wine would make it a lethal and undetectable poison.

Nine Provinces: A symbolic term for China as a whole.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Qi: Qi ( ) is the energy in all living things. Cultivators strive to manipulate qi through various techniques and tools, such as weapons, talismans, and magical objects. Different paths of cultivation provide control over specific types of qi. For example, in *Remnants of Filth*, the Liao Kingdom’s techniques allow cultivators to harness demonic qi, in

contrast to Chonghua's righteous methods, which cultivate the immortal path. In naturally occurring contexts, immortal qi may have nourishing or purifying properties, whereas malevolent qi (often refined via evil means such as murder) can poison an individual's mind or body.

Qiankun Pouch: A common item in wuxia and xianxia settings, a qiankun pouch contains an extradimensional space within it, to which its name (/ "universe") alludes. It is capable of holding far more than its physical exterior dimensions would suggest.

Qin: Traditional plucked stringed instrument in the zither family, usually played with the body placed flat on a low table. This was the favored instrument of scholars and the aristocracy.

Qinggong: Literally "lightness technique," qinggong ( ) refers to the martial arts skill of moving swiftly and lightly through the air. In wuxia and xianxia settings, characters use qinggong to leap great distances and heights.

Seal Script: Ancient style of Chinese writing developed during the Qin dynasty, named for its usage in seals, engravings, and other inscriptions.

Shichen: Days were split into twelve intervals of two hours apiece called shichen (/ "time"). Each of these shichen has an associated term. Prior to the Han dynasty, semi-descriptive terms were used. Post-Han dynasty, the shichen were renamed to correspond to the twelve zodiac animals.

Hour of Zi, midnight: 11 p.m.–1 a.m.

Hour of Chou: 1–3 a.m.

Hour of Yin: 3–5 a.m.

Hour of Mao, sunrise: 5–7 a.m.

Hour of Chen: 7–9 a.m.

Hour of Si: 9–11 a.m.

Hour of Wu, noon: 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

Hour of Wei: 1–3 p.m.

Hour of Shen: 3–5 p.m.

Hour of You, sunset: 5–7 p.m.

Hour of Xu, dusk: 7–9 p.m.

Hour of Hai: 9–11 p.m.

Souls: According to Chinese philosophy and religion, every human had three ethereal souls (hun /) which would leave the body after death, and seven corporeal souls (po /) that remained with the corpse. Each soul governed different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation.

Spiritual Core: A spiritual core (/ linghe) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study. If broken or damaged, the cultivator's abilities are compromised or even destroyed.

Suona: A traditional Chinese double-reeded wind instrument with a distinct and high-pitched sound, most often used for celebrations of the living and the dead (such as weddings and funerals). Said to herald either great joy or devastating grief.

Sword glare: Jianguang (/ "sword light"), an energy attack released from a sword's edge, often seen in xianxia stories.

A Tale of Nanke: An opera by Tang Xianzu that details a dream had by disillusioned official Chunyu Fen, highlighting the ephemerality of the mortal world and the illusory nature of wealth and grandeur.

Talismans: Strips of paper with written incantations, often in cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

Three Disciplines and Three Poisons: Also known as the threefold training in Buddhist traditions, the three disciplines are virtue, mind, and wisdom. Conversely, the three poisons (also known as the three defilements) refer to the three Buddhist roots of suffering: greed, wrath, ignorance.

Wangshu: In Chinese mythology, Wangshu ( ) is a lunar goddess often used in literary reference to the moon.

Xihe: In Chinese mythology, Xihe ( ) is a solar goddess often used in literary reference to the sun.

Xun: A traditional Chinese vessel flute similar to the ocarina, often made of clay.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

Ziwei Star: A star known to Western astronomers as the North Star or Polaris. As the other stars seemed to revolve around it, the Ziwei Star is considered the celestial equivalent of the emperor. Its stationary position in the sky makes it key to Zi Wei Dou Shu, the form of astrology that the ancient Chinese used to divine mortal destinies.

Zi Wei Dou Shu Divination: Zi Wei Dou Shu (/ “purple star astrology”) is a common system of astrology in Chinese culture, which predicts one’s fortune by plotting the position of certain stars at the time of one’s birth. The presence of stars in certain “palaces,” or sections of the sky, indicates either an auspicious or inauspicious destiny with regard to different aspects of one’s life. Zi Wei, also known as Polaris, the North Star, is a primary star that represents the emperor or leadership.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou (“Meatbun Doesn’t Eat Meat”) was a low-level soldier who served in Gu Mang’s army as a cook. Meatbun’s cooking was so good that, after Gu Mang turned traitor, the spirit beast Cai Bao (“Veggiebun”) swooped in to rescue Meatbun as it passed by. Thus, Meatbun escaped interrogation in Chonghua and became a lucky survivor. In order to repay the big orange cat Veggiebun, Meatbun not only cooked three square meals a day but also told the tale of Mo Xi and Gu Mang as a nightly bedtime story to coax the spirit beast Veggiebun to sleep. Once the saga came to an end, it was compiled into *Remnants of Filth*.

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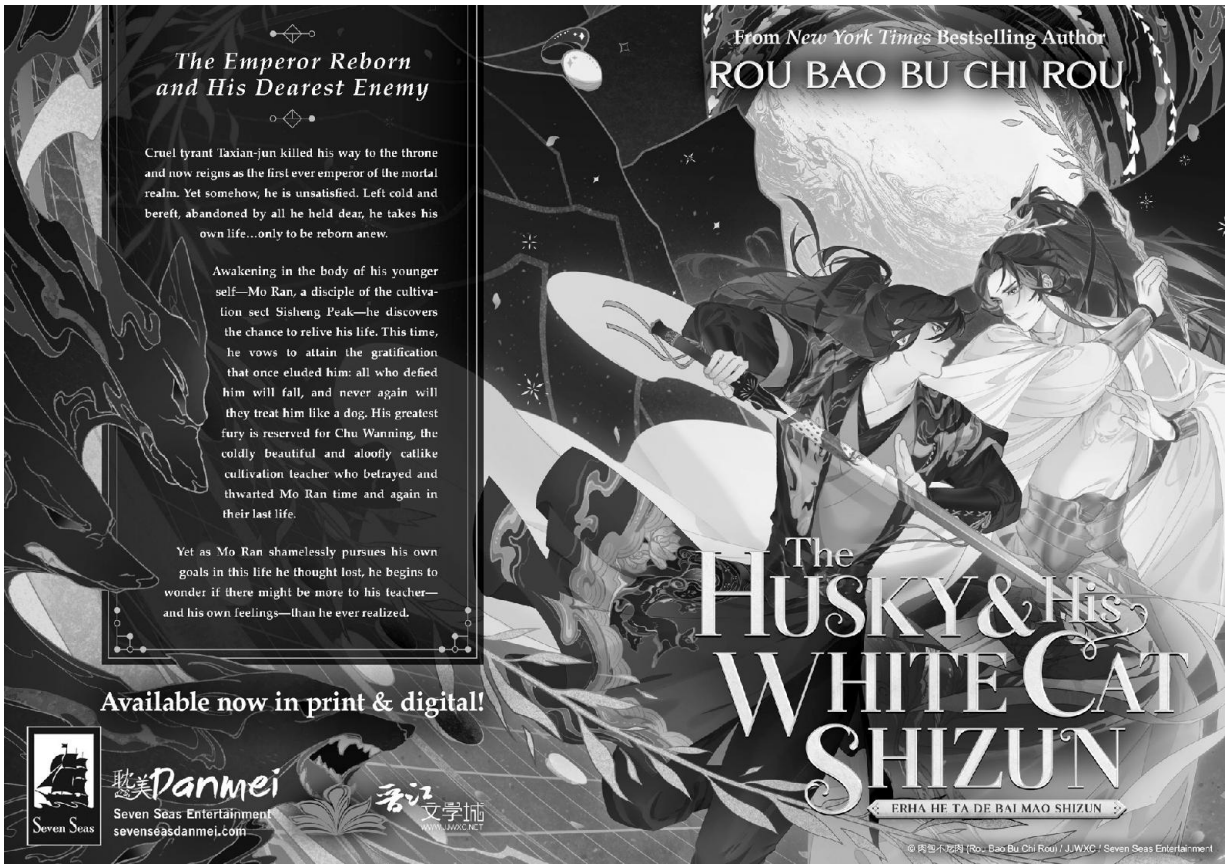
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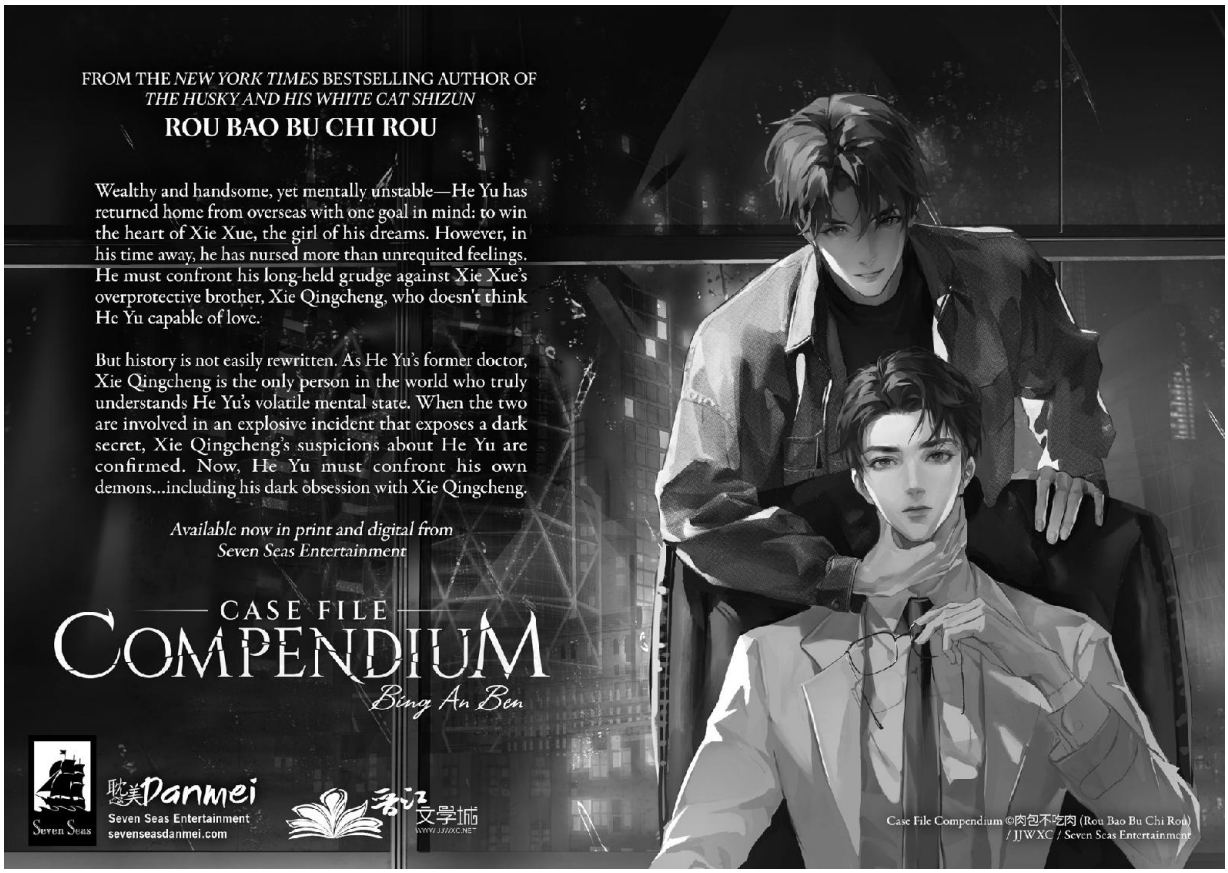
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Footnotes

Chapter 166: Cousin

[1] Respectful term of address for someone of an older generation.

Chapter 170: First Meeting in White Robes on a Snowy Night

[2] Referencing imagery in the fifth verse of “Twenty Verses on Drinking Wine” by Jin dynasty poet Tao Yuanming.

Chapter 171: Youthful Days of Tenderness and Budding Yearning

[3] Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, two scholars from the Warring States period, exemplify a friendship of deep understanding. Bo Ya was a qin player, while Zhong Ziqi loved listening to music.

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Meanwhile, Mo Xi's own experience in the Time Mirror has left him more certain than ever that some secrets still linger behind Gu Mang's treasonous defection eight years ago. He's determined to dig up the truth at any cost—even the cost of his own life.
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